



Still Standing

At a time of great struggle and heart-wrenching decisions across the Ontario racing industry, one caring owner, one fast-acting trainer and a team of capable veterinarians fought extraordinary odds to save the life of one **TRULY INDESTRUCTIBLE COLT.**

They found him in the field with his mother nearby, just where they'd left him the night before.

It was, literally, his first night on the farm, after being foaled out and raised at the local vet clinic. The two-month-old colt spent the day trailing his mother, Miss Poole, in one of trainer Rod Zeron's paddocks on his 20-acre property in Bishop Mills, ON, roughly an hour south of Ottawa.

Earlier that afternoon Zeron had picked mother and son up from Russell Equine some 60 kilometers away. Miss Poole had been confirmed back in foal and she was ready to be discharged, along with the foal by her side, an Art Colony colt. Zeron loaded the pair and put them out in the field with a few turnout horses when he got home. Later that evening, he took his wife out for ice cream and stopped on the way home so she could meet the farm's new addition.

Less than 10 hours later, the little foal was still with his mother, much as they left him, only he had fallen a

bit off the pace walking slowly behind her.

Upon closer inspection, something was very wrong. The colt had suffered some sort of catastrophic injury, his neck ripped open to such a horrifying extent that the only reasonable conclusion was a bear or coyote had attacked him during the night.

That initial conclusion was wrong, the truth so much worse and more heinous. On the right side of his furry neck, the colt had a hole about an inch in diameter. On the flip side, however, was a cavernous, grotesque wound the size of a football, eight-to-10 inches in size, and so deep it was possible to see exposed vertebrae by peering into the grisly crater.

He had been shot.

In disbelief, Zeron immediately loaded both mare and foal back into the trailer, which he hadn't even had a chance to unhook since he returned from the vet clinic the day before.

Heartbreakingly, the trainer stared at the profoundly



DAVE LANDRY

by Lauren Lee



COURTESY RUSSELL EQUINE

wounded colt and couldn't quite comprehend how he was still alive, much less still on his feet.

"I didn't believe he was going to make it to the clinic. I've done a lot of hunting in my life and I've seen other animals die from a lot less wound," said Zeron.

"I just couldn't think of why he wouldn't just lay down and die. He was just living on shock or pure heart or whatever. I was thinking it was so sad, he's just too young and doesn't know enough to lie down."

Bob Montgomery got the news of the colt's life-threatening injury and made his way from his home in Carp, ON to the clinic, fearing that his role for the day would be the macabre task of making the call to put the young horse out of his misery.

A long-time owner, Montgomery, 71, has been

racing horses since he was a boy alongside his father at the local fairs.

Last year, his smile warmed a chilly night at Mohawk Racetrack when his then two-year-old trotting colt Northern Victory, also trained by Zeron, won the \$100,000 Ontario Sires Stakes Grassroots championship — giving him the biggest purse of his career after more than a half century of horse ownership.

Although Northern Victory provided a great thrill, Montgomery's heart has always belonged to Miss Poole, a nine-year-old pacing mare who won 22 times during her career and earned close to \$185,000. After retiring her last year, Montgomery bred his all-time favourite mare for the first time, pairing her with ill-fated sire Art Colony. She foaled a colt in late April. Montgomery named him Phoos Boy and immediately had a soft spot for Miss Poole's first born.

"They wanted me there right away. I was 99 per cent sure I was going to have to say, 'Put him down.' When I saw the hole in his neck I could not believe it. You'd have to see it to believe it," said Montgomery, who expected the worst and was speechless when the colt rose to his feet and started towards him.

"When I got there he was laying down, but he got up and walked over to me... and I couldn't put him down," said Montgomery, his voice momentarily cracking.

"So I said, 'Save him.'"

Saving the colt would fall to the veterinarians and staff of Dr. Garth Henry's Russell Equine Veterinary Services, the very place Phoos Boy had left the day before in perfect health.

Dr. Tiffany Richards, who had grown quite attached to the colt from his earlier time at the clinic, thought it was some kind of cruel joke when he walked off the trailer and into her care.

"It was very surreal, to be honest. I thought they were pulling a practical joke on me, because everyone knew how much I didn't want him to go in the first place because he was my favourite," she said.

"Rod said, 'Tiff, you are going to kill us, but something happened to him...' I said, 'What do you mean something happened to him?' and then I'm thinking that it's probably just a cut or something — I can fix him right up!

"So I was a little overwhelmed, to say the least, when he stepped off the trailer."

Moreover, she was really not sure where to begin saying, frankly, that treating bullet wounds in horses wasn't part of her vet school curriculum.

"It was a first," she said, with a chuckle.

"I was basically just going by the seat of my pants, trying to treat each individual symptom — first the shock, then the wound... it was very much an unknown, what our next problem was going to be. We started out just trying to treat what we could, when we could, and see where it went."

First, the colt had to be x-rayed so the veterinary team, which included Dr. Henry and Dr. J.D. Adams as well, could assess whether any of the crucial structures in the neck had been fatally damaged. They checked the spinal column, the nuchal ligament (which holds the head up and down), the jugular and the carotid artery and found everything surprisingly intact, with the bullet missing the jugular by less than a centimeter.

"We were kind of amazed. If the bullet had gone either a centimeter in either direction, he probably wouldn't be alive. There's a very small window in which he could have been shot in the neck and have limited damage and he was shot in

that exact location,” said Dr. Richards, incredulously.

That exceptional good fortune aside, Phoos Boy also needed a few more breaks before he would be out of the woods, as the vets methodically worked through the steps of treating his trauma.

Firstly, they had to treat his shock and work to prevent infection from the present necrotic tissue using extensive antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs.

Then, there was a dicey 48-hour window where his nursing and nutrition became critically important. Would he be able to maintain himself, nutritionally? Would he physically be able to maneuver his head into a nursing position? Would Miss Poole perform her role in the whole process, a concern since some first-time moms show indifference towards their nursing foals in the best of times?

Like everyone else on the team, Miss Poole stepped up to the plate in the colt's time of need and nursing resumed without a hitch, allowing the vets to move on to the next task at hand — wound management.

Although antibiotics had been started almost immediately on arrival, the focus became constantly cleaning and clearing the wound area of necrotic tissue in an attempt to stave off infection. Cleaned. Bandaged. Re-bandaged. Repeat. Over the course of the following 10 days, as infection was brought under control, the team turned their minds to the final hurdle which was assessing the more long-term aspects of Phoos Boy's recovery and looking for potential physiological deficits that might hamper his abilities in the future.

As he began healing, Dr. Richards was looking for signs of excessive constriction, making sure that he'd be able to move his head appropriately so as to nurse properly, access his food bucket or lower his head to the ground to graze like a normal horse.

In what could be compared to occupational therapy work in humans, the vets even rigged up his food bucket so it would be elevated and he'd need to stretch out a bit when feeding, hoping to avoid more restriction.

“The majority of it has healed remarkably and he goes out and runs and plays with his mom. He still maybe doesn't move his head quite like a normal foal does, but he can graze and nurse properly,” said Dr. Richards, who says the colt's biggest issues are now cosmetic, though it hasn't impaired his ability to be quite the charmer.

In fact, as Phoos Boy healed and moved closer to finally being released from the clinic in late September, she found it difficult to think about letting him go again.

“Believe me, I've asked,” she said, with a laugh. “Can he just stay here forever?”

Aside from this remarkable story of determination and recovery, there is still the unsolved mystery of who shot the foal and why?

Initially, the Ontario Provincial Police came out to investigate and combed the property looking for clues. Montgomery posted a \$5,000 reward for information leading to an arrest, but no suspects have been identified to date.

The two most popular theories are that it was



PHOTOS COURTESY RUSSELL EQUINE

The bullet's entry point on the right side of the colt's neck.



The exit wound on the left side shown in its stages of healing.



either a hunting accident or some kids out joyriding and causing trouble, since there had been some streetlights shot out in a neighbouring area.

Zeron rejects the notion that it could've been a hunting mishap. He says folks in that area are seasoned hunters who often cut through his property, but would never mistake a two-month-old foal for a deer, especially when tailing along behind a mare in the field.

“At first they thought it was people shooting deer, but no one shoots deer in July,” he said.

“Where I come from, it's a rural and hunting community. Everybody out here hunts and knows the difference. They walk through your fields, but they don't mix up a deer and a horse.”

Still, Zeron is amazed that the foal he found shot in his field has lived to recover and be registered with Standardbred Canada, with every

reason to believe that there's still a chance at racing glory in his future.

“He's definitely a fighter. So I say, he's either going to be one of two things... he's either going to be a world champion or he's going to be no good, because the old saying is that 'anything no good, you can't kill it,’” said Zeron.

Montgomery is still upset about the circumstances, but equally astounded with the recovery.

“If I could've found whoever did this, I'd likely have shot them myself,” he said.

“All the people down here, no one has seen anything like it. Nobody can believe the recovery that this little guy has made,” said Montgomery, who is quick to praise the veterinary care that his colt received throughout the ordeal.

Dr. Richards, in turn, underscores how compassionate and exceptionally committed Montgomery was in saving Phoos Boy, regardless of great expense.

At a time when the standardbred community is making gut-wrenching decisions regarding the fate of horses with questionable value and uncertain futures, Montgomery had a colt in front of him with perhaps the *most* uncertain future imaginable and decided to save him at any cost.

“I would say that 90 per cent of owners would've seen it and decided to euthanize at that time, but Bob came out and saw him 24 hours after he'd been in the clinic and saw him eating and nursing. He was up and would come over to you at the door — I think that won him over,” she said.

“I remember Bob saying, 'He's got more will to



live than anyone I've ever met and there's no way I'm going to make the decision to end his life now’.

“So he told me to do whatever we had to do to save him. And we did.”