

SPIDER'S BAD DAY

A Texas-bred who didn't make it on the racetrack
wins his battle with a rattlesnake



It's 3:00 a.m.,

and I'm trying to decide whether to shove pieces of rubber hose up a horse's nostrils. Spider, the horse in question, stares at me dully. His head is swollen to twice its normal size, and truly epic amounts of saliva, mucus and something else I'm afraid to identify are oozing from his mouth and nose.

My flashlight, long overdue for batteries, flickers sporadically – it's not helping me make my decision. The dim light still scares 3-year-old Spider and he flinches, trying to huddle in the darkest corner of the pen. He is miserable and confused, and the last thing he wants is a light in his face.



I'm scared too. It's critical to keep Spider's adrenaline levels down, since his breathing is already so impaired by the snakebite venom. If he begins to panic, nothing, not even the last-ditch rubber hoses, can save his life – especially in such unskilled hands as mine. I've never performed emergency procedures with rubber hoses before, not even for the sheer learning pleasure of it. Note to self – time to correct this gap in my horse husbandry skills.

My husband, Tom, saw Spider violently shaking his head several hours ago as he drove home from work. I was out riding one of the ex-racehorses here at the LOPE Texas ranch, trying to teach a young filly that there's a gait (actually, even a couple of them) between walk and gallop. She was surprised – no one had pointed this out to her before.

By the time Tom got my attention and we ran to his pasture, Spider's nose was already starting to swell dramatically. We looked closely. Two fang marks dotted his muzzle. He had been bitten right between the nostrils.

I speed dialed our vet, Dr. Damon O'Gan, as I quickly led Spider toward the round pen near the field's gate. Spider had stopped shaking his head, but was clearly in pain and kept balking at the lead rope. We made chaotic progress as Tom shooed Spider from behind, waving his arms and hat to keep him moving forward. Big John, Spider's pasture buddy, hovered around us anxiously, trying to "help" by crowding near Spider protectively. Normally I would have been touched by John's devotion, but he was a huge horse with the proportions of a dinosaur. And the gracefulness too – he nearly stepped on me twice. It was a distraction I didn't need at the moment.

Damon finally answered his cell phone. "Hello," he said

in his usual Wyoming drawl. He had spent the last several years in Austin but never quite sounded like a Texan.

"Hi Damon, it's Lynn," I began. "How are you?" Damon replied. He drew out this question with about three extra syllables and an odd offbeat iambic accent (as in "Hoow arree you?"). Damon never sound-

ed flustered or in a rush. I'm pretty sure I could call him in the middle of some huge task, like open-heart surgery on a horse in a field during a thunderstorm, and he would sound exactly the same ("Hello, Lynn. Hoow arree you?").

"Fine, fine. Hey, I think Spider got bitten by a snake. He has fang marks right between the nostrils, and, God, his nose is swelling like an inch every 10 seconds."

"Ah," Damon sounded relaxed and vaguely pleased. "That's very interesting. Lynn, can you tell me what the

fang marks look like? How long is the distance between them? Just an estimate is fine, no need to measure."

Great, no need to measure – because I don't usually carry a ruler around the farm, waiting for measuring emergencies. Another horse husbandry gap to fill. I squinted at the fang marks (how do you describe fang marks?) – it looked like Dracula bit Spider, two pinprick dots each with a drop of blood, almost perfectly centered between the nostrils. I relayed this cinematic information to Damon, hoping he wouldn't ask to me clarify which Dracula (Bela Lugosi? Gary Oldman?).

"Lynn, you'll need to give him a twelve cc dose of Banamine in the vein. Check him every hour, especially the breathing rate. It's going to get ugly, and we might have to come out for a temporary tracheotomy procedure."

Damon then launched into a technical lecture on rattlesnake bites and how they can cause massive



After recovering from a rattlesnake bite, Spider and Lynn Korke take on a new challenge – a saddle.

swelling in the head and upper respiratory systems. Horses can only breathe through their nose, so they can't use their mouth as a backup breathing system like we do. So if the nostrils get blocked, horses can't breathe. At all. Which is not good for activities such as being alive.

Damon broke my morbid train of thought with an odd and ominous question. "Lynn, do you have a rubber hose you can cut up?" I did, but asked why. "Cut two pieces, each about eight-inches long, and be ready to shove those up Spider's nostrils if he looks like he is about to stop breathing. If things turn the wrong way, there's no way I can get there in time. It will be up to you."

I pondered the unpleasant images that came to mind. "Call me every hour or so and update me," Damon said. "I'm on call tonight, so I can come out anytime. And good luck."

That conversation replays in my head as I watch Spider now. At 3:00 a.m., Spider looks worse than I ever imagined a horse could look. His head is one huge oval, with no sign of contour from his cheekbones, jaws or other facial bones.

His nostrils are caked with creeping cascades of yellow foam, and their normally large openings are down to the size of a man's finger. When I touch his nose, it's no longer velvety and soft. Instead it feels like concrete. The hardness disturbs me the most. How can he breathe with such unyielding membranes in his nose? Worst of all, it hurts him. He tenses at my light touch, clearly in pain.

I never saw the rattler and am sobered by the damage one snake can inflict on a 900-pound horse. If Spider is in genuine peril from its bite, what would it do to a human? It's scary.

It seems strange that our pretty little 26-acre ranch, just 30 minutes from Austin, would be home to such a dangerous creature. But Texas can be a wild and rugged place. It doesn't seem untamed here, as I look around at the sturdy pipe fencing, large shade trees and listen to the occasional truck zoom by even at this late hour on Highway 21, but it can be, and I make a mental note to pay more attention to where I walk.

I snap off the flashlight, and can sense Spider relaxing a little in the dark. I walk slowly up to him and gently pet his neck. I put my ear close, so I can listen to his watery breathing and count off the rate. I'm hoping for a good number, so that the rubber hoses can stay in my jeans pocket. If the rate is too high, it's time for emergency hose action.

In spite of his incredibly bad day, Spider puts his head down and leans against me looking for a pat. He's only a 3-year-old and has never been ridden. Debbie Mulcahy, a breeder from Wylie, Texas, who was getting out of the business, donated him to our racehorse adoption program a few weeks ago. She loved Spider, her last homebred Texas Thoroughbred colt and entrusted us with finding him a new home. He is truly a sweet horse, a 900-pound puppy with a happy-go-lucky disposition and love of bananas that borders on fetish.

As I count his labored breaths now, I feel a finger of panic poke rudely at my mind. Pushing it away, I make an effort to think positive thoughts. I remember how I first met Spider. The breeder donated nine of her horses to us. They all arrived together in a huge semi-load-sized trailer. The drivers opened the side gate first, and the mares tumbled out together down the ramp.



Spider (front left) and three of his brothers check out their new surroundings at the LOPE Texas ranch near Austin.

The mares were all pretty and smart with lively eyes, and immediately cantered off to the round bale of hay in the corner of the field. They weren't interested in me yet; they had their priorities straight.

Alice, the matriarch of the mares at 15 years old, took charge of the field and bossed the younger, less favored mares away from the round bale. In spite of her long trip, she looked pleased that we had the good sense to serve dinner early. She gave me a detached appreciative look, the type that a suburban matron might give to a lunch waitress

who was prompt with the drink order. She was dark bay, with deep intelligent eyes and the impressive belly of a many-times mother.

Then, the second gate on the trailer was opened, and all the geldings plus Spider the colt came leaping down the ramp. The boys weren't quite as smart about the trailer exit as the girls – it took them awhile to figure out where the hay was in their pasture. They milled around, jostling each other, like guys heading for the draft beer line in a sports bar. There was tall Solomon, a big affable horse with tremendously oversized ears for a Thoroughbred. Then came JJ, another dark bay who resembled Alice (his mother) but with a macho swagger. JJ and Solomon began nipping at each other and bucking in unison, not sure what to make of this new place.

Eclipse came next, the intellectual of the group, looking embarrassed by the frat-boy antics of his brothers. He lingered near me, wanting to introduce himself

properly. He was a beautiful red horse with a striking crescent mark on his forehead and calm, gentle eyes.

Spider was the last one out, following his siblings' big act like a rookie comic in a variety show. As he clumsily scrambled down the ramp, one of the drivers turned to me and said,

"That horse is a stallion. Better watch out for him – he might be dangerous."

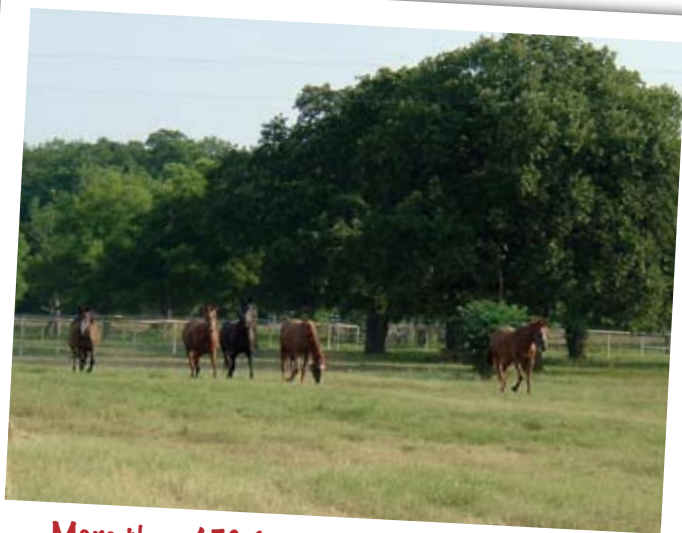
I looked at Spider and laughed. Spider was the most Bambi-like stallion I'd ever seen. He was a chestnut horse with a cute little star and snip of white on his face. His legs were long and gangly, and he clearly didn't quite know how his body worked yet. His head was a tad big for his body, and he had a sweet face. I couldn't help but like him on sight. He's just a kid, I thought to myself.

In the past few weeks, Spider had established himself as

the clown of the farm. He liked to turn over troughs and splash the water out. If he saw you in the pasture, he would run across the field to greet you, gangly legs flying, with a delighted "you-must-be-coming-to-see-me" look on his face. It was impossible to be in a bad mood around Spider's enthusiasm. Spider had an innate premise that the universe was a benevolent, wonderful place where everyone existed to pet him.

I was looking forward to teaching Spider about saddles and bridles and being ridden. We gelded Spider last week, and I was planning to start his training in a few days. Poor Spider! In the last seven days he had been gelded, then bitten by a rattler. Not such a benevolent universe this month.

I feel so responsible for him. And I realize that right now, here at the farm, in the middle of the night, I'm the most qualified person to take care of him and to make the right decision. Damon is a solid drive away, Tom is not a horse person, and all of our immediate neighbors



More than 450 former Texas racehorses have found new homes and careers thanks to LOPE Texas. Through its website, the non-profit organization pairs sellers of ex-racehorses with potential buyers and also takes in horses at the LOPE Texas ranch that are then put up for adoption.

have less veterinary care experience than me.

This isn't an empowering feeling.

I concentrate on counting breaths, trying not to speculate as to what exactly is dripping on my hair from Spider's face. The count is good. His breathing rate has stabilized from when I last checked him an hour ago. The rubber hoses can stay in my pocket for now. I am too tired to walk back to the house so I keep petting Spider. It's not much, but it's all I can think of to do. He wheezes and snuffles and keeps leaning against me, not at all put off by my wet and stained shirt. My dirty jeans, grimy from riding, complete my ranch haute couture.

It's not the way I planned to spend my 44th birthday. Aren't people this age supposed to be confident and settled and, at the very least, not covered in horse mucus? And haven't they all mastered their careers, gently settling into that "I'm watching the 401(k) plan grow" phase of work life?

I ponder why exactly my previous life as an accountant was so awful. Why I ran from it to do...this? I don't remember any rattlesnakes or crushing sense of responsibility in that career. And the offices were so clean and cool in August, not like this round pen in Texas that still radiates heat at 3:15 a.m. The glamour of it all, I think to myself. Spider nicely punctuates this thought by trying to rub his swollen head on me.

I spot something white in the pen and bend down to pick it up. It's a napkin from dinner about six hours ago. It cheers me up to see it, and reminds me of Tom. My internal whining begins to fade. And the fragmented panic is leaving, overwhelmed by the distracting chatter in my mind.

After we had given Spider his shot, all we could do was wait and watch the venom's progress. By 9:00 p.m., I was too worried to leave Spider. So Tom cooked a huge spaghetti dinner and brought it out to me in the field. We sat in his truck bed and had an oddly romantic al fresco dinner, quietly talking and watching Spider together. Spider's head was only about a third as swollen as now, and things seemed much more manageable then. I could notice the night sky, always so big here in Texas, and enjoy Tom's improvised truck bed restaurant.

All of this business about changing careers is really Tom's fault, I remember. He was the one who started

giving me those books on philosophy, the ones that make you think for yourself and engage in other dangerous activities. The Fountainhead. Man's Search For Meaning. How to Find the Work You Love.

And music too – Tom always was bringing me eclectic music. The Samples, Chapterhouse, Mono, to name a few. One of his first gifts to me was a Sur Sudha CD full of Nepali sitar music. I played it over and over again as I planned my first trip to Nepal – just hearing the music made me feel bold and cool enough to attempt the trip.

No wonder I married him – how could I resist a man who courted me with philosophy and alternative music? And who caters me Italian dinners in the middle of dusty fields late at night?

Perhaps picking up on my oddly soothing thoughts, Spider is dozing lightly. He seems to be in a relatively calm stupor. I tiptoe out of the pen and head back to the house to catch another hour of sleep before my next check on Spider. As I walk along the quarter-mile driveway thinking of Tom's philosophy books, I start remembering why I chose this life.

On the way back, I quickly glance at the other horses to make sure all is well. That rattlesnake is still out there somewhere. Sally, the filly who just discovered the joy of trotting, is curled up like a cat sleeping. Zuper, our handsome permanently retired gelding, stands guard over her. He nods his head at me sleepily as if to reassure me she is safe. Alice and the other mares stand together calmly.

I look down at my work boots to make sure nothing is slithering under them. My bootlaces catch the moonlight a little as I stride quickly and steadily down the driveway. Compared to my office days, my shoes are rugged, my jeans are loose and my physique is muscular and fit. In my twenties, I was an out of shape, pale chain smoker whose work environment never required anything more physical than hefting big blue payroll binders around.

I decide that very few women celebrate their 44th birthday this way, and that it'll make an excellent story to tell my nephews. They already think I'm a rock star just because I ride horses everyday. This story will knock them dead.

And it's guaranteed that the rest of the day will be better. With such a dubious start, my birthday is bound to improve. Right?



Lynn Korke is writing a collection of essays about her rewarding (and often entertaining) work with ex-racehorses in Texas, and is currently shopping for a literary agent.

LOPE Texas has helped transition over 450 Texas ex-racehorses into new homes since 2003. Of these, over 100 horses (like Spider) have been donated to the LOPE Ranch where Lynn has worked with them to find the best new home possible.

LOPE is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity and relies on donations from the public to do its work with the horses. If you would like more information on LOPE or how to donate, please contact Lynn by e-mail at lynn@lopetx.org, by phone at (512) 565-1824 or visit www.lopetx.org.