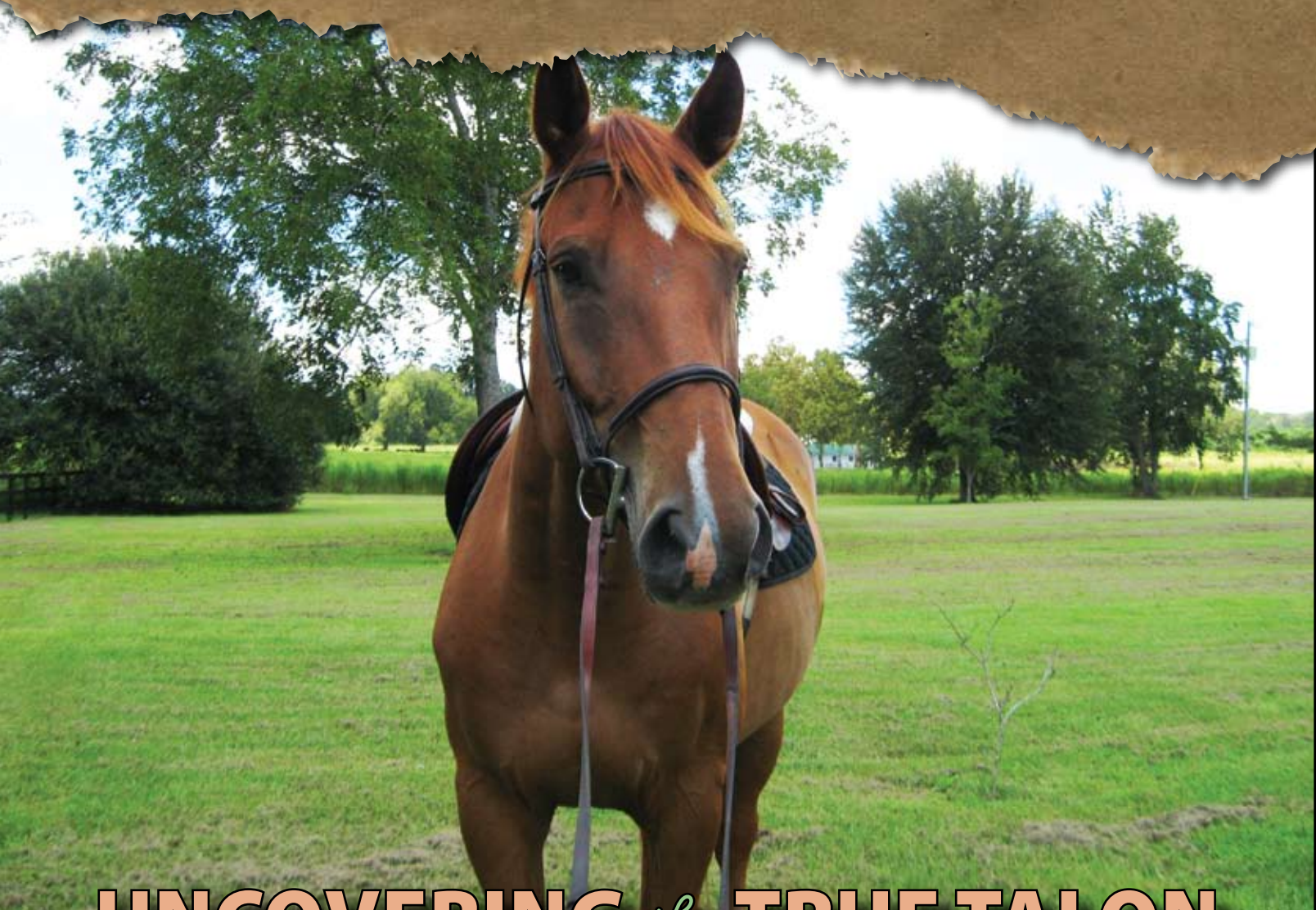


Three years of patient rehab for this unhappy and dangerous jumper removes layer after layer of problems revealing a safe, happy sport horse.



UNCOVERING *the* TRUE TALON

By Andrea Haller

MY HUSBAND JOE AND I own Wellborn Quarter Horses, a 107-acre breeding farm of—you guessed it—Quarter Horses. So what do Quarter Horses have to do with Warmbloods you ask? Actually, nothing, except that behavioral and physical problems can occur with any breed, and since by accident we started to “rescue” horses five years ago, every breed imaginable has filtered through our little horse haven, including Warmbloods.

We’re not a charitable organization. We simply found ourselves taking in horses that were unwanted and needed rehabilitation, whether their problems were physical or mental. By word of mouth, before we

knew it, we were up to 15 horses at one time in some state of rehab at the farm. Joe happens to be a terrific trainer, especially from the ground—our very own horse whisperer if you will—and is very successful breaking through major training and handling issues with horses.

So in our five short years of operation, we’ve had a handful of Warmbloods pass through our farm, each one with a variety of problems that were a challenge to solve. We have found over time that there are very few “bad” horses out there. Sometimes they’ve had a bad experience, but even more often, they are in some sort of pain and they can’t tell us what the problem is. Horses’ reactions to pain can be so extreme that they lash out at

humans and at other horses and are ultimately labeled as “dangerous.” The slightest noise sends them over the edge. On the flip side there are some horses that remain subdued and suffer in silence.

Before I share our experiences with Talon, I need to stress a few points. We are not playing the ‘blame game’ of who did what to this horse. We are not accusing anyone of bad training or mishandling. After three years with us, Talon was no longer dangerous and was rehabilitated, and fortunately he has moved on to a wonderful career with his new owner. But the journey of creating a happy horse was like peeling an onion. Each layer took time and patience to discover until it exposed the next. Here’s Talon’s story.

INITIAL FIREWORKS

In May 2005 we were approached by a local sport horse trainer who frequently imported Warmbloods. At that time he had a five-year-old Hungarian Warmblood named Talon, with fabulous jumping bloodlines, that wasn’t doing well. He was imported from Hungary two years prior as a stallion and gelded shortly thereafter at age three.

I was told the horse was being given to us because he didn’t like being “on the bit” and couldn’t stay consistently sound. He was supposedly safe to ride. The trainer felt certain we could handle Talon.

Upon arrival in the trailer, fireworks were already brewing. While unloading off the trailer, Talon let out a kick, just missing his owner, and managed to continually spook his way over to the portable metal panel pen that was near our round pen.

At five years old, he was a handsome, well-built light chestnut gelding standing 16.2 hands. As I walked over towards the pen to give him water and get a closer look, his hind end was towards me, and he spooked and kicked backwards at me during take-off. Of course he was in the pen and I was not, but it still surprised me. Safe to ride? This creature wasn’t safe to stand in a pen, let alone ride.

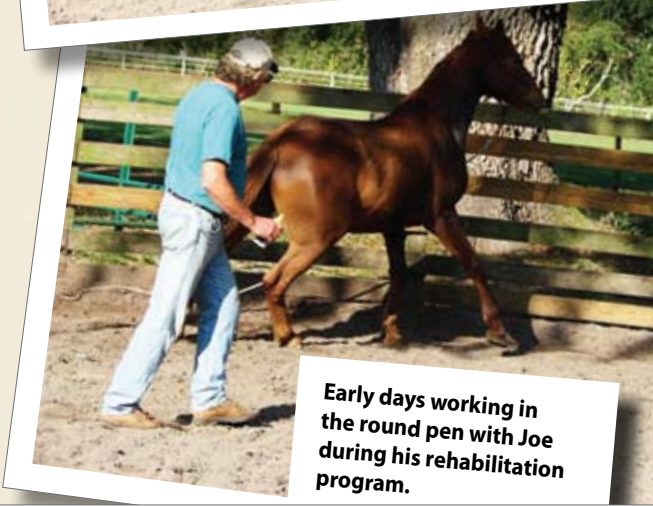
As it turned out, the more we uncovered Talon’s problems, the more we found that my initial assessment based upon his first hour at our farm was pretty accurate. Not only did this horse have an assortment of physical issues, he had several psychological problems as well. One by one, we peeled back each layer of Talon’s troubles over the next three years. We observed the following:

- Talon could not work in the round pen (at liberty) without trying to climb the walls, especially to the right. In other words, his body wasn’t flexible enough to bend to the right on a 20-meter circle, even at a walk.
- His right front foot was possibly a club foot and could be causing a problem.
- He attacked other horses in his pasture, next door and over the fence unless the fence was electric; especially at mealtimes.
- He was very vocal and aggressive during mealtimes unless he had unlimited hay and/or lush pasture.

THE FIRST LAYER

The potentially clubbed foot and his shoeing was one of our first concerns. We commissioned a vet and a farrier to discuss this issue with us shortly after we “obtained” our new Warmblood. As if we weren’t even there, these two professionals discussed what kind of shoe and wedge to put on.

Finally I could no longer keep my mouth shut. “Hold it just a moment!” I



Early days working in the round pen with Joe during his rehabilitation program.



interrupted. "We aren't putting anything on that foot. He needs to go barefoot, so please shape his hoof the way nature wants it shaped. If he goes lame and can't be sound barefoot, he isn't going to be sound shod." (I learned this 15 years ago from one of my off-the-track Thoroughbreds. Don't try to have feet match each other. Instead have the foot match the ankle it is attached to.)

Both "experts" were taken aback at my opinion and the fact that I had voiced it. My husband didn't take sides at first. In fact, looking back, he didn't express his opinion either way.

But at that moment, we now believe that we resolved Talon's lameness issue. Several weeks later our regular vet, Dr. Beth Moses, visited the farm. We explained what took place with the other vet and our farrier. After careful scrutiny of his ankle and foot, she declared, "This is not a club foot; his ankle is slightly different than the other ankle." Consequently, any efforts to have his feet "match each other" plus the added stress of metal shoes created a lame horse!

Lest any of you doubt that metal shoes can cause more problems than they solve, I invite you to check out the "Links" page on our website wellbornquarterhorses.com and read more about this issue. Even the major farrier journals and mainstream horse care journals are finally discussing the heretofore avoided topic of barefoot versus shoes.

So the first layer of Talon's problem was solved. A horse in pain "on his feet" can't think straight, nor can he travel in a round pen comfortably. We like to use the round pen to work through training and psychological issues and so now Talon could focus without pain.

ROUND PEN WORK

My husband Joe began to work with Talon in the round pen (mind you, a round pen 62 feet in diameter). Horses, especially if they are big Warmbloods, should not be worked in anything smaller. There is magic associated with a 20-meter circle...not only in horsemanship but in mathematics. Circles are one of the best training tools but they can also be torture for a horse.

In all three gaits, Talon became more comfortable. Moving in freedom, at first he could not find where to place his head since he was so accustomed to having it "placed" for him. This characteristic was more noticeable to the right: it took him weeks to be able to carry his head where he needed it to be in order to balance his own body and maintain his balance and cadence in all 3 gaits. His canter began to look like it would be a joy to ride in either direction.

We patiently wait for any horse to tell us "I am ready to ride." Joe is one of the few trainers I have met, to this day, who is adamant about this fact: a horse is not ready to ride until he knows he has all four feet, and each foot can be moved independently of each other. If you watch a horse and listen, he or she will tell you when they are ready. In the softest most unspoken way, the message is very clear.

Talon's first few rides were done in the round pen without a bit and bridle—just a string halter. In other words, we re-started him. We believe that improper use of bits creates horses like Talon. He may have been able to put up with the abuse of his feet, but combined with the abuse from the bit, he simply could not hold himself together. He had consequently become very dangerous to ride, as we were told this by several sources after it became known that we had the horse at our facility.

Instead of an understanding of how a bit works properly as a communication "connection," these unfortunate horses anticipate the pain that might come from it. One of the most educated individuals that we have had the honor to work with concerning bits and biting is Dr. Jessica Jahiel. Another educator named Mark Russell, author of *Lessons in Lightness*, is what I call a "bitmaster." Watching him work with horses of all ages has been among the most enlightening experiences of our lifetime with horses.

Now that Talon had less foot pain and knew where and how to place his feet and could find his balance in both directions at all three gaits, it was a shock to learn that he was more comfortable going to the right! Previously the right was so unbalanced he almost looked lame! Joe worked on evening him out, by frequent changes of direction (in the round pen, no rider). Using a 45-foot line, he also guided



Talon through our many obstacles and large open areas with hills and other natural features, including one of our ponds! I should point out that in these open areas, Joe does not use a lunge line and the horse travels mostly straight.

As Talon became more comfortable on his feet in all terrain riderless, we finally added a rider, but it didn't make a difference because by then the horse was so confident that with or without a rider, a saddle, or a bit, he knew that there wasn't going to be any pain. But still, we felt that Talon wasn't as happy as he could be.

THE SECOND LAYER

Despite his vast improvement in riding, he was still aggressive with other horses and he had a hard eye. I can't explain it but his eye was simply not soft. He literally made the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I was in close proximity. And, his sweat had a funny odor that is hard to describe. My other horses smell pretty nice even if they are dirty or sweaty.

Enter the Photonic Torch. Developed by Dr. Brian McLaren in Australia, it is acupuncture without needles

and can be used on humans, horses, even dogs and cats.

I purchased my first unit in January 2004 and one year later, after seeing the remarkable results on our horses and my own painful back and knee, we became distributors for Dr. McLaren. Because I didn't feel comfortable around Talon I didn't use the torch on him until we had him about a year.

I spent a lot of time on Talon's first treatment. Because I still didn't trust the horse, Joe held his halter line for the treatment. Talon began to breathe harder, then he sighed, and next he started to pant when I was treating the areas on and around his hocks. I decided to spend extra time in the hock area due to his strange reaction. When I was finished, and turned to write my notes down, I heard a loud crack. I missed it, but Joe said Talon lifted and cracked his own back!

Overnight the eye on that horse changed. I noticed it, and guests and people who work here noticed it. I discussed the incredible results with Dr. McLaren and found that quite by accident I treated the "aggression" points located on the inside of his hocks. I had just solved another mystery!




Talon, now happy, with his new owner Samantha.



2008, exactly three years since he arrived at our farm. We have stayed in touch with Samantha and Talon and they are a wonderful combination. Samantha has shown Talon at a couple of hunter jumper competitions in which he placed well, even winning reserve champion.

Talon remains barefoot (and sound) to this day, and we are very grateful that Samantha has evolved into a "barefoot is beautiful" horse owner.

In closing I would like to leave you with a quote I found by Hans Handler, head of the Spanish Riding School: "Allaying the horse's fears is the first order of training." Surprisingly, it was in Jaime Jackson's book *Horse Owners Guide to Natural Hoofcare*. 

THE FINAL LAYER

Talon was no longer lame and no longer aggressive. He maintained his kind eye and personality. We were thrilled with his progress but, now and then, he was still tense at mealtimes. We also happened to notice him eating his own manure and I don't mean just a few nibbles. He was truly eating a lot of his manure when he was confined and ran out of food. Cleaning his stall was mysteriously too easy! We discussed this with our vet.

She instructed us to try ranitidine (the ingredient in Zantac) before each meal. For about 28 days, Talon had these "acid blockers" before each meal and his demeanor changed yet again. Possibly he had small ulcers, or just a high concentration of stomach acid. The newest research from companies such as Merial (marketers of UlcerGardtm and GastroGardtm here in the U.S.) claims that up to 90 percent of horses have some sort of ulcer condition.

Many inexpensive ulcer prevention products are available, including using alfalfa hay instead of grass hay. I did not know a lot about ulcers when Talon was here, but this year I have learned a great deal. I was under the misguided impression that ulcers were an issue concerning racehorses and other horses that are kept in stalls. Since Talon and the rest of ours were rarely, if ever, kept inside, we thought our herd was exempt.

A NEW BEGINNING

By using ranitidine, we found that Talon was finally happy, and later that year, we felt he was ready to be sold. A friend of ours named Samantha bought him in May of

About Andrea Haller: *As co-owner of Wellborn Quarter Horses in Wellborn, Florida, the farm hosts numerous training clinics during the year, including the popular Obstacle Trail Challenge in cooperation with the Horse Protection Association of Florida. More recently she has authored The Equine Market published by Packaged Facts in August 2009. More information on that report is available at www.packagedfacts.com. When she can, Andrea loves to ride her favorite mare, Secret.*



Talon poses for the camera, demonstrating his "soft eye."