

A Two Part Story. This is the Horse Part.

It was the Friday before my 49th birthday. I took the day off and spent most of it working around the farm. About mid afternoon, I saddled my mustang stallion. It was spring and a good day for a ride. I bought this mustang from the Bureau of Land Management two year earlier when he was five years old. Five is older than ideal to start work with a mustang. A horse that has lived that long in the wild will have done a lot of fighting and will have developed a harem of his own. Those experiences will make a horse more of a challenge to gentle and to train. I had pretty well tamed this horse and trained him to ride and drive. He was in most ways a decent horse but from time to time some of the things he learned or experienced as a wild horse in the rough lands of Nevada would come through.

For example it a lot of work to get him to pass through the two tall upright posts across the entrance to the farm. My guess is that these posts reminded him of the corral entrance that he was driven through when he was captured. On more than one occasion he furiously destroyed a garden hose in the farm yard. I assume he thought it was a rattle snake. He had a great sense of dignity and would attack and knock down any of our geldings at the slightest provocation. He clearly had a lot of fighting experience and he could defeat any horse on the farm in seconds.

This horse has a color pattern that is commonly described as gruella. That pattern is black mane, tail, feet and with a black dorsal line over the backbone. Gruella is a classic mustang pattern although the base color can vary. A horse with the same pattern and a light brown or dun base color would be called buckskin. This horse is classic mustang all around with the head shape of a Spanish Barbary horse, the original mustang bloodstock. We named him Gruella.

I intended only a casual springtime ride around our 225 acre farm.

I road north on the long driveway to the Township road, traveled east on the Town road until reaching the County road and then followed it south less than a half mile. At this point I crossed the ditch into a forty acre field. The wind was from the north and we were now south of the farm and the main herd of horses. That's when trouble began. For no reason I could determine at the time, the Gruella started to buck. He fought me hard and clearly wanted to run north toward the farm, without me.

I like to think that every time I work with a horse I am training that horse. With that in mind it is important that the horse be better behaved in some way at the end of the ride than at the beginning. There was no way I could let the horse have his way. He bucked high and hard until we were both winded. Then we fought each other for control until he caught his wind and started bucking again. He did this over and over. Many times he came very close to getting rid of me but I was too bullheaded to let him get away with that. The rider who says he's never been bucked off hasn't ridden all that much but I could count the number of times I have been bucked off on one hand so I don't leave easily.

The horse was seven years old, a youth in horse years, I was nearly 50. Eventually, after what was probably a half hour or more of these episodes of bucking to exhaustion, I decided he was going to win. I wasn't going to let him know he had won however. I decided to drop him and get off as he fell. Generally you can drop a horse by pulling its head all the way back until it is against your knee. If he persists in bucking or running in that position he will lose balance and fall. It is not a neat or pretty sight but at least I could claim a win of some kind.

I had one hand on the horn and the left rein in the other. Pulling hard on the rein tends to force you forward in the saddle. My hand on the horn was there to push me back so I could keep a good position. I did ride forward in the saddle however. Not far but my seat position was less than ideal. At this point I was probably forward and also loser in the saddle than I wanted to be. He was still bucking and as I hit the saddle hard for what might have been the 300th time, everything from my waist on down seemed to blow up. The instantaneous pain and heat was incredible. My legs went limp. I didn't know what was wrong but I knew this ride was over. The next time he went high on a rolling buck I just took an exit over his head as he wound down. I hit the ground in a roll to the right. I've done that before. Anyone experienced in falls knows how to roll so as not to break bones. I rolled to a side because if you give a horse a chance he will do all he can to avoid stepping on you. The next second I was lying on my back on this beautiful spring afternoon trying to figure out what I had busted. The Gruella was soon gone.

It took a little time to catch my breath and get my bearings. Not from the ride and fall but from the pain of whatever had happened while I was in the saddle. I have injured my back before but this felt different. I could move my legs but not well and not entirely as I intended. I rolled to my knees and stood up. I could only move my legs if I pointed my toes together. That's right, together, toes to toes. That of course was farther than I could have rotated my legs when I started this ride. I was about ¼ mile from the farm house with a pasture and a couple of fences between. I walked until I reached the first fence. I rolled under it and then lay on the ground for a time to catch my breath. I was now in my wooded pasture with grand oak trees. I got up by pulling on a fence post and then resumed my walk toward home. It was an incredibly slow, one leg at a time deal. When I reached the first oak tree I let myself down to rest and steady my breathing again. The pain was breathtaking. I was surprised to see a woman I did not know rushing toward me from the direction of the county road. When she reached me she said she was driving by and met a horse running north wearing a saddle and bridle. She said she recognized it as a mustang from the freeze brand that the BLM puts on all mustangs. Very few people would know that. She seemed to be an intelligent woman who knew horses. She asked if I was hurt and if I needed any help. Of course I told her I was fine, just taking my time strolling home. What else could I say? I wasn't bloody and I didn't care to discuss injuries below my waist with a strange woman. I didn't know what was wrong anyway. Never did see her again. Have no idea who she was.

After a rest I worked my way further through the pasture and when the pain got to be too much I rested at the base of another oak tree. I know this is hard to believe but just then another woman showed up. This one I knew.

Back at that time, I had talked Gail into having a cleaning lady come in for a few hours each week. Gail was working two jobs, it is a big house and we could afford it. Gail ended the cleaning service after some months because the precleaning she (Gail) felt she needed to do before the cleaning lady came was just too much. Gail just couldn't tolerate the idea of the cleaning woman coming into a messy house. I guess we all have our quirks.

Anyhow, the cleaning lady saw the Gruella run through the farm yard with a saddle and bridle on and came looking for me. She found me by the tree and asked if I was hurt and if I needed any help. Well you already know the answer to that. I told her I was fine. Since she was done with her work for the day she left.

I was getting close to home now. I reached the gate that marked the boundary between the north side of the pasture and the big lawn around the house. The Gruella was standing on the lawn side courting a mare that was in the pasture. Well, that explained why he went wild. I had taken him out of a pasture north of the farmstead and when I rode him south he got downwind of this mare in heat. Testosterone is a mighty powerful thing.

Horse romance, by the way, is terribly rough and violent. The courting process involves a lot of biting, kicking and screaming, both ways.

I suppose I wasn't thinking too clearly at the moment. The Gruella was standing at the fence across from the mare still wearing his saddle and bridle. I walked toward him thinking I should take the saddle and bridle off as long as I was passing by. He swung into a pivot and I knew just what he had in mind. In my poor condition I was barely able to turn and duck before his two hind hooves swept through the space where my head had been. I felt the wind from his hooves. If I had been wearing a hat he would have taken it off. A lot of men have been killed in just that way. A horse kicking high and hard like that can smash a head like a pumpkin. I kept right on moving toward the house and I let him be with his mare.

I needed to rest. I called Terry and asked him to come over to put the Gruella away. Terry is good with horses. Standing was very uncomfortable and I wasn't bloody so I went to the bedroom and laid down flat on my back trying to figure out what was busted. I don't have a good recollection of time but I suppose it was about five o'clock. Probably two hours since I went out on my ride. The walk home might have taken most of an hour.

Gail came home and seeing Gruella down in the east yard she walked toward him to catch him. I heard her car come down the driveway and when I realized what she had in mind, I yelled at her to leave the Gruella be. Terry showed up soon and took care of the horse. Gail was a little alarmed to find me lying down. I told her what I knew. We decide it was probably best I get to a hospital. For a reason I don't recall we decided to drive all the way to Methodist Hospital in south Minneapolis. In hindsight it probably didn't matter.

That is the end of the Horse Part.

You can break here if you like.

Next is the Hospital Part.

Gail drove us to Methodist Hospital about sixty miles away. Methodist is a large and well regarded hospital in south Minneapolis. By the time we got there I didn't feel much like walking so I asked Gail to have an orderly bring a wheelchair. We went in the Emergency entrance and did all the necessary paperwork. Then we waited. I wasn't bleeding externally and was able to communicate which as always means you go to end of the list.

After an hour or so I needed to empty my bladder. Sorry, don't know how else to explain it. Anyway, I left the wheelchair and slowly walked into the restroom. I still needed to use the toe to toe method I had perfected walking home. I was getting weak and I was stiffening up. When I relieved myself it was all bright blood red. I walked out to the nurse's desk and told her that I had just relived myself and it was all blood. I told her I was going to pass out soon. She said, "Not in my waiting room you don't." Now the next part is hard to believe but both Gail and I remember it this same way. The nurse bounded over the desk by putting one arm on the desk top and swinging the rest of her body over just like an athlete. I don't really recall if she looked that fit or not. She then grabbed a wheel chair, put me in it and wheeled me immediately through the double doors into the emergency room. She told people to help her and put me onto a gurney.

A doctor was there in a minute and they went to work. I explained to them that I was injured riding a bucking horse but unfortunately what they heard was that I was injured falling from a horse. Later someone said that if I was in an ER in Cheyenne they would have known the difference but these folks in Minneapolis get patients with back injuries from falling or being thrown from a horse. The injuries you get from staying too long on a

bucking horse are injuries to the pelvis. I wasn't so sure of that at the time of course but I did tell them to check my pelvis.

The ER doctor ordered x-rays and they wheeled me into a nearby x-ray room. While the films were being developed the doctor and staff were doing a physical exam. He asked me to sit up. I got part way and told him I could not. My blood pressure crashed for the first of several times and they scrambled. They stuck IVs in me and did all they needed to do to get me stable. I don't think I really passed out that time. There was a half dozen people working on me.

Someplace in here is where the ER doctor made a decision that turned out to be wrong. Because he suspected a spine injury, even though he could not see it on x-ray, he gave me blood thinners. That is normally a good idea with a spine injury. Many people become paralyzed not directly from the injury but rather from the effect of hematoma or blood clots that develop around the spinal nerves following injury to the spinal bones or muscles. The blood can compress and permanently damage the spinal cord. He guessed that he was protecting me from that kind of permanent injury. Unfortunately, I was suffering from internal bleeding in my pelvis caused by the mechanical ripping and tearing of lots of soft tissue. In my lower abdomen, not around my spine

Over a period of about four hours, I was wheeled into x-ray three times. More and more doctors were called in and by midnight they had brought in the Chief of Radiology, a general surgeon, an orthopedic surgeon, a neurosurgeon an internal medicine specialist and the head of ER. I'm sure I wasn't the only problem they had that night but I was the only guy who seemed to be dying for whom they had no reasonable diagnosis. It was a nightmare for the ER staff. I could talk and walk, had no external wounds but appeared to be dying. Frankly, I don't recall being all that worried, although poor Gail probably was.

Tension peaked about midnight. By that time the physicians were having serious discussions about the patient right at my bedside. A breach of protocol but they were desperate. At one point the lead surgeon, who was furious, shouted at the attending ER doctor, "So this guy walks in here on his own and now all I can do is watch him die?" The problem was the blood thinner that the ER doctor administered made it too risky to cut me open. The surgeon wanted to open me and look for ruptured arteries and injured organs but he could not.

Finally, on what I think was my fourth trip to x-ray, I told them again to look at my pelvis. They did. When the film came back the ER doctor looked at it and said, "Your pelvis is broke like a wish bone." I think I was stabilizing about that same time. Several nurses were constantly working to keep my blood pressure up with continuous IV fluids. If anything that was done that night helped, it was that. All my bleeders were apparently capillaries and small vessels. As my blood pressure dropped and the internal pressure around the capillary wounds increased they essentially stopped bleeding on their own. I'm not sure but that might have happened the same way if I had stayed home and rested.

When the x-ray was finally directed at my lower pelvis it was incredibly obvious that my pubic symphysis was busted open. This is essentially a rigid joint at the front of my pelvis. It was open well over an inch and a half. The pelvis is made up of five bones, a right and left Ilium, a right and left Ischium and the sacrum. The sacrum is the base of the spine. These five bones are all bound together by rigid cartilaginous bonds. The spaces between them are small and although not totally rigid, in an adult very little movement is possible. The pubic symphysis is the joint that sometimes opens in very difficult childbirth. I'm going to point out however that breaking this bond in the pelvis of a pregnant female is not the same as breaking it in a middle aged male.

When the front of my pelvis opened that far, the other joints of my pelvis each had to break and all the ligaments and tissue that hold my pelvis together had to give. All soft tissue damage, no broken bones. The

trauma caused a terrific amount of small vessel bleeding. The doctors estimated that I bled at least two liters internally. There is no real therapy for this injury. It has stabilized but hasn't really healed. It remains a gap of well over an inch.

Well, the mystery was solved but there was nothing to do except keep my blood pressure stable. By early morning they determined I was going to survive and moved me to the ICU. About midmorning the head surgeon visited me in the ICU. He was clearly relieved.

Over the next two days they performed a lot of tests to determine that I had not ruptured my bladder or seriously injured any other parts. I hadn't.

They kept me three days total. I didn't care to stay that long but there was some concern about blood clots. The entire midsection of my body turned black. By the time I left I could walk ok with crutches. I was concerned about work so I had Gail stop on our way home. Somebody must have called the hospital because when we reached the company everyone was outside. They applauded as I walked in on crutches. That was nice but I didn't know what to do in response.

The Gruella has been a gelding now for many years but we did get two nice sons from him before he was gelded. One from Misty, the mare that was in heat on that day. The Gruella is still a fine horse with a lot of dignity and personality. I have had both hips replaced over the years. No doubt the misalignment caused by this injury has been a factor. I tell people the Gruella is my favorite horse but he has put me in the hospital three times.

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