

# Tiny but tough

**M**y cell phone rang just as I put my hand on the doorknob, heading outside. The caller ID flashed “Brett,” and I looked at my husband’s name in surprise. Brett was supposed to be in the garage, just a few steps away, where he had spent the afternoon rearranging our blue storage tubs.

I glanced out the window as I answered the phone, and there was my husband, curled up like a horseshoe in my garden, clutching his knee. He had seen Mercury, our new 900-pound Fell Pony stallion, break out of his paddock, and while running to tell me this, Brett had stumbled on a rock and dislocated his knee.

I rushed out to Brett and knelt, careful not to jar him. The denim on his jeans stretched impossibly tight over his grossly swollen knee. Brett gripped his leg, clenched his teeth and encouraged me to go check the horses. Powerful, domineering Mercury was now in the pasture with the others, and Brett knew there could be trouble. “I’ll be fine,” he said, and clasped his knee a little tighter, hunkering down to wait for the pain to ease off.

I ran down the driveway and through the barn to the south pasture. The



scene was like a bizarre play where all the characters are caught frozen in place immediately after a crime. Five of our horses—Josie, Jackson, Traveler, Rebecca and Laura—all stood like statues, heads raised, nostrils flared, staring at the white stallion who had thundered into their midst.

Mercury now stood in the distance on a little knoll—magnificent, fearless ... and dangerous. He was born wild on the fells in Cumbria, England. We could ride him, but his beauty sometimes left us in danger of forgetting the wildness, power and aggression that still ran hot in his blood. He wasn’t afraid of anything, and he’d protect his herd from everything.

**TOO CUTE:** Kim Hinson’s daughter, Megan, holds Phoenix months before a brutal attack left him with a serious head injury.

**A Miniature Horse’s diminutive size is an asset after an attack by a stallion leaves him with a traumatic head injury.**

*By Kim Hinson*

With a jolt, I noticed the heavy iron gate to Mercury’s pasture swinging wide open, the lock bolt thrust aside, and the extra-thick precautionary rope we’d tied so carefully flapping in the chilly January wind. So our savvy new stallion could open gates and untie ropes. Great.

Taking a deep breath, I counted the horses crowded under the bodark tree, making sure they looked unharmed. All five huddled tight, watching me. Then my heart raced as I noticed one face was missing: Where was little Phoenix?

## An unfair fight

Phoenix, our yearling Miniature Horse, stood a mere 18 inches tall and weighed in at maybe 40 pounds—small, even for a Mini. Our little orange baby, we called him.

I scanned the pasture in the growing darkness, my eyes wide and determined. Struggling to calm my nerves, I spotted a shadowy lump in the distance. It was Phoenix, laid flat out and still as death, halfway between Mercury and me.

Mercury snorted—a loud, challenging, stallion snort. He looked right at me, shaking his head fiercely, his long mane swirling like a tempest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Phoenix lift his head. He flopped back down, and then with a mighty struggle he heaved himself to his feet only to topple over yet again.

I knew what had happened. Tiny as he was, Phoenix was a colt. At 1 year old, he hadn't started acting "studdy"—aggressive and full of himself—so we hadn't gelded him yet. But Mercury knew another male when he smelled one, no matter the size, and Mercury meant to be king of this herd. So he had attacked.

Mercury snorted again. This time he fixed his gaze on Phoenix and stepped forward, his hooves making their way straight toward the tiny heap that was our little orange baby.

"Hey!!" I yelled. And then, louder, "NO!" I forced my voice to be strong, loud in my best "Bad Horse, Bad Dog" tone. Phoenix struggled to get up, but he stumbled and fell after just one or two steps. It looked like there was something wrong with his head. It looked ... bigger than usual, and heavy.

My trembling fingers pushed the speed dial number for our local



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veterinary clinic. It was after hours, but someone always answered. I spoke briefly to the veterinarian on call, who headed out toward us immediately. But I couldn't wait until then to get Phoenix safely away from Mercury.

I'd need help. With my daughter Megan away at college and Brett huddled up and miserable in my flower garden, my next calls were to my two nearest horse-savvy friends, Dale first, and then Kathleen. No answers. Darkness settled around me, and a January wind froze my fingers as I left hurried messages, asking them to come if they could to help me get Mercury and the rest of the horses out of the pasture, away from our badly injured Phoenix.

Then, shivering in the cold field, I did what I always do when I'm in terrible trouble. I called Brett. Dislocated knee or not, I needed his help.

Minutes later I heard a muffled footstep from the dimness of the barn. And there was Brett. Limping but still strong, he was the cowboy in those old Westerns who just wouldn't stay down no matter how many times he'd been shot. He grabbed a handful of halters,

hobbled around to each horse, and one by one, led them to safety as I stayed close to Phoenix. Then he came and got Mercury and put him back in his own pasture, far from the other horses, and double-chained the gate shut.

Just as Brett finished, Kathleen and Dale each pulled into the barnyard. Bringing up the rear was the veterinarian's truck.

## Racing for help

Kathleen hurried to join me in the pasture. By now it was pitch-dark, but by the light of a powerful flashlight, we saw Phoenix raise his head then let it flop to the ground again. Together, Kathleen and I encouraged him to his feet and led him to the lit barn. Seeing no visible wounds or obviously broken bones, the veterinarian said it looked as if Phoenix may have been kicked in the head. She told us our best option was to take him to the nearest referral clinic, about 60 miles from our farm, but she warned us that treatment might cost thousands of dollars, and the prognosis was guarded, at best. Still, I didn't hesitate to make the decision to go.

Phoenix couldn't stand on his own, so riding loose in the big trailer wasn't a safe option. Instead, we removed the back row of seats from my van, which made enough space for the colt to lie flat out on the floor, and gently laid him inside. Kathleen carefully crawled over him, sat with her legs stretched out on either side of Phoenix, and tenderly lifted his head to her lap. I jumped into the driver's seat, and we headed out. At one point during the trip, I heard the scuffle of paddling hooves on carpet as Kathleen tried to soothe the colt through a seizure, murmuring, "It's OK, Phoenix, it's OK."

A harrowing hour later, on a road black as pitch, my straining eyes

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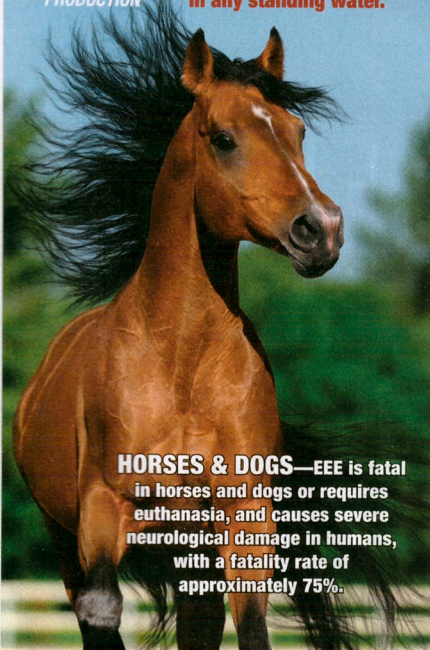
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spotted the clinic sign and the gravel driveway. I backed up to a tall sliding door and jumped out to open the back of the van. Instantly, a flock of veterinary angels fluttered around my little orange baby, murmuring soft directions to each other—"Grab that corner of the blanket and I'll support his legs...."—while crooning endearments to calm him. They gently lifted him onto a tarp and brought him inside.

## Small benefits

The team worked quickly. They took Phoenix's temperature, listened to his heart and lungs, and examined his gums and eyelids. Gentle hands prodded and probed him from head to tail, assessing the extent of the damage Mercury had done. "It's a good thing he's not skinny," I heard one say. "He's going to need everything he has to pull through."

Finally, Kelly Fleming, DVM, DACVIM, the lead veterinarian, turned toward me. "It looks like your stallion grabbed Phoenix by his neck and shook him," she said, pointing out a very swollen section on both sides of his mane, about halfway down

Phoenix's neck. Attacks like this are common among wild stallions, who use this brutal method to kill foals who are not theirs, ensuring their own genetic dominance in a herd.

The shaking, Fleming explained, had caused Phoenix's brain to slam back and forth in his skull, leading to trauma and rapid swelling, which in turn caused his neurological problems and seizures. "It's very much like the shaken baby syndrome that newborns get from being battered by adults," she said. The area around Phoenix's orbital sockets was also grossly swollen, which made his head appear twice as large as normal.

As with traumatic brain injuries in people, it was impossible to predict

just how much damage had been done and how lasting it might be. The only recourse was to offer supportive care until the swelling in the brain diminished, and then assess his ability to function.

For the moment, though, Phoenix was stable. Fleming had given him Valium, a sedative, to halt the seizures; DMSO and Mannitol, an anti-edema drug, to reduce swelling in his brain; as well as Banamine and intravenous fluids. Now, he was resting quietly on a twin-size mattress in a giant stall.

Fleming told me the chances of Phoenix recovering were about 50/50. He would need intensive care for several days to allow the swelling in his brain to go down. The good news was that many of the challenges of treating traumatic brain injuries in full-size horses wouldn't be an issue for Phoenix. Large, heavy horses who are recumbent need to be rolled regularly or hoisted in slings to prevent devastating pressure injuries to their muscles. Due to his

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small size, Phoenix could safely remain down for hours or even days at a time. If he did need to be moved, Phoenix could be easily rolled and repositioned by the veterinary technicians.

Plus, if Phoenix attempted to stand on his own, he wouldn't be nearly as dangerous staggering about as a full-size neurologically compromised horse would be. The veterinary team, who would monitor him around the clock, could easily protect Phoenix and themselves whenever he did try to stand, assuming he recovered enough to do so.

The situation was still touch-and-go, but no one was ready to give up. "We're going to think positive," Fleming said. "I have high hopes for this little guy."

Through my tears, I gave Phoenix a pat on the cheek to say goodbye, then I headed home to tend to the rest of my herd as well as my husband.

Phoenix stayed at the clinic for six days. I phoned daily for updates and drove out every other day to see him in person. The morning after he was admitted, Fleming took radiographs of our tiny colt's head and neck, looking for fractures that would complicate or prevent his recovery. Thankfully, she saw none. Also encouraging was the fact that Phoenix hadn't had any seizures since he'd arrived, even after his anti-seizure medications were stopped.

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seemed to be helping; the swelling of his head was going down rapidly, and a daily neurological exam showed improvements. After two days, he was making attempts to stand on his own, with greater and greater success on each try.

"Everyone loves Phoenix," the secretary said the first time I came to visit him. "He's in the stall that looks empty." She grinned as she gave me directions to find him. Our tiny Phoenix was in a full-sized horse stall now, and he was impossible to see unless you looked over the door.

Finally the day came when I called for my update, and Fleming gave me the wonderful news. "Well," she said. "He's eating, he's pooping and he's running away when we come into his

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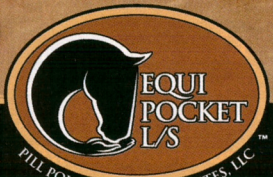
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stall with a rectal thermometer! He's ready to come home."

People with brain injuries—even mild concussions—often have cognitive deficits for days, weeks or even years. We had no way of knowing whether Phoenix was having difficulty remembering things, but he seemed to be reacting normally to his environment. Fleming told me she thought he could finish his recovery in calm, familiar surroundings.

I picked Phoenix up in our horse trailer later that day. Driving slowly home, I was breathing easy, listening to the radio and feeling the warm Texas sunset on my face. By the time I pulled into the farmyard, our barn was deep in shadows, but Phoenix's stall glowed warm and welcoming. We'd spread new shavings, filled the water trough, and piled fluffy coastal hay in the middle of what we were calling the recovery room. He no longer needed any medications, but we'd been instructed to keep him very quiet for a week before putting him back out with the herd.

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Phoenix's best friend, a yearling filly named Rebecca, watched from nearby as Brett and I lifted Phoenix from the trailer and set him down in the stall.

Phoenix took a few shaky steps, and hot tears sprung to my eyes as I watched him stoically wobble his way to the hay pile. I heaved a sigh. Brett shifted his crutches to one hand, put his arm around my shoulders, and said, "Give him time, Babe." Leaning hard on his crutches, he said again, "Just give him time." 🐾