

SPIRIT SON HIS BATTLE FOR LIFE

FIGHTING SPIRIT



One-time Champion Hurdle hope Spirit Son was struck down with a life-threatening illness in the spring. Here, his trainer Nicky Henderson documents the remarkable efforts made to save the six-year-old

SPIRIT SON sustained a tendon injury before last season's Champion Hurdle, which was a bitter blow in itself. Following treatment to repair the tendon, he went to Charlie and Tracy Vigors' Hillwood Stud where we rest and summer so many of our horses and especially [owner] Michael Buckley's.

He had been there six weeks when Charlie rang me early on a Sunday morning – I was in Glasgow airport returning from the Scottish Grand National meeting – to say they had found Spirit Son on the floor of his box and unable to get up.

Having spoken to Michael I flew south and went straight to Hillwood, where Charlie and the vet, Jamie O'Gorman, had managed to get him on to a tarpaulin on the lawn in front of his box.

He was lying flat out but could move his neck and tried to get up, but his hind-end was obviously not working, although he showed none of the normal symptoms of a spinal or pelvic injury that one normally associates with paralysis.

It was impossible to know what had happened but it was important that he did not lie on one side for too long and it was necessary to turn him over approximately every two hours. He would eat the grass at his head and we picked him buckets of fresh grass and hand fed him.

The vets feared that if he did not improve by the afternoon they would have to put him to sleep. And anyway, how was he going to get through the night lying outside? It was starting to rain and get colder.

He seemed remarkably calm and Corky [Browne, Henderson's head lad] joined us, together with Jamie and another vet, Bruce Bladon, and Charlie's staff.

He hadn't improved but he was fighting, and having spoken to Michael – who cares about his horses more than anybody I know – he was as determined as we were that we were going to fight for him. We made several calls to identify the top intensive care expert in the country and two people suggested Celia Marr from Rosdadales Veterinary Surgeons in Newmarket.

I managed to contact her while she was at a party in Newmarket and she kindly agreed to come straight down. However, it was going to take approximately three hours to get all the necessary medicinal needs



Owner Michael Buckley visits Spirit Son in his box at Seven Barrows this week

together and be driven down.

As it was getting dark, the problem was how to cover him. We contacted Lambourn marquees and within an hour or so we had erected a marquee over him together with strip lighting, deep straw and loads of fresh grass and we were still turning him over every two hours.

Celia's arrival at about 9pm was a bit like M*A*S*H descending on us as she and her intern swept in armed with equipment and carried out a multitude of tests and set up drips and fluids. She could not identify the problem but mentioned the possibility of a rare virus that attacks the neurological system.

I had to drag Corky home after midnight, leaving Celia, Charlie and the team for the night. Everybody had agreed that he must be a very brave horse, but then all very good horses are probably very brave and he was fighting very hard. Celia felt it was critical that he was up by 6 or 7am the next morning, or he probably never would be.

At 3am, Charlie texted me to say "He's up". We all went back to Hillwood first thing although he was back down again – he was too exhausted to stay up for long. Celia had taken lots of tests and returned to Newmarket.

Hannah Leech, who looked after him and rode him every day at Seven Barrows, joined the vigil. While still having to turn him over regularly, he eventually – but only with a lot of help and support – managed to stand up again. He was amazingly perky but obviously very weak and it was a matter of having a vigil of four people around the clock to either turn him or help him up – and back down again.

Corky, Neil, Hannah and Charlie's squad were all part of the round-the-clock team. This was

obviously going to be a very long battle but Michael wanted everything possible done for him.

The tests showed he had indeed been infected by the suggested virus, which can lie dormant in any horse, and we therefore assumed this to be the case.

Although the virus seemed the logical explanation, Celia always said she would at some stage like to bone scan his neck to rule out a fracture, but this was obviously not possible until he could move. He began to get stronger and took some very wobbly steps when his hind legs did not co-ordinate with his front. He resembled somebody staggering out of a night club at 4am much the worse for wear.

Charlie had a large box padded throughout and CCTV cameras put in and Spirit Son managed to take the few necessary steps from the marquee that had been his home for five days. He was still unable to get up unassisted but he was eating and taking a few more steps each day.

Corky went over regularly to help Hannah and the team take him out for short walks, holding on to him by his tail. The progress was slow but significant, even though the prognosis was still very poor. The virus is evidently seen more in the USA and is

very rare in the UK. Recovery rates are pretty low, but Spirit Son did not know the stats and he was, as everyone had continued to say, the bravest horse they had known.

He was deemed stable enough to be driven to O'Gormans on June 11 for a bone scan on his neck. The travel was no problem but the scan revealed fractures to the fifth cervical vertebra, which brought a whole new scenario to the situation. Was it the virus or the fracture, and how had he fractured it?

The scan was inconclusive and a more in-depth investigation was required by means of a CT scan and myelogram, but this was going to have to be performed in Newmarket. We weren't unduly worried about the extra journey, but we were very concerned about the general anaesthetic he needed.

However, we had to try to go forward aware of the risks involved. He came through the anaesthetic but with concrete evidence of damage to the C5 and C6 vertebrae.

THE poor fellow was quite shaken by this but soon returned to Hillwood, where he settled down again as we discussed the next step. There were two known surgeons who could perform an obviously extremely complicated and undoubtedly dangerous operation, one in the USA and one, John Walmsley, in Hampshire, who luckily was prepared to perform what was going to be a huge task with major risks involved. But it was the only option.

Michael, Charlie, myself, Hannah et al had to endure a long, nervous wait for the news but, once again, he pulled through when we knew the odds were unfavourable.

It was back to Hillwood a week later for eight weeks' box rest with all his food at head height. Charlie felt that even after a couple of days his whole demeanour was a little better and, amazingly, he looked remarkably bright and well.

He's now into the last three weeks of this part of the drama and then we'll be able to see if his coordination has improved.

The prognosis for racing always has been and still is very low, but he deserved a chance to have a life, whether it's on a racecourse or in another role. Michael has been incredible to support this venture throughout, while Charlie, Tracy and the team at Hillwood have been quite amazing and we wouldn't be anywhere near where we are now without them. Hannah, Corky and many others have played their part, while Celia Marr, John Walmsley and O'Gormans have provided the veterinary expertise and have all been outstanding.

With them, and not to mention Spirit Son's strength and will, we still have a dream.

It has been a staggering story of human and equine determination, and whatever the outcome I cannot possibly express how incredible everybody has been in this fight.

To see the horse sound and happy is the only reward and, if it did happen, the word 'miracle' would not be far away.

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