

# Annie Finds a Friend (or two)

By Glenn Wilson © August 2008

Annie was a solo, depressed, sad, foundered and lovely pony. She had been alone for around five years. She was chronically foundered and had been the victim of some ordinary farrier trimming and veterinary advice. She couldn't even run away from us! So, I got to work on her hooves *and* her human carer. Her hooves improved a little but her demeanour didn't. She had trouble moving and her body had abnormal muscle development from standing in the typical founder stance. She was a mess but I knew all she needed was horse company and some TLC. After three trims and a deterioration in her condition (not because of the trim but because she was still unmotivated to move, which would generate some circulation in her hooves and begin the healing), her carer and I negotiated her move to live with my herd.

Surprisingly she loaded in the float pretty easily. The unload in the dark was even more surprising. She turned around and hobbled down the tail gate and let out the first nicker I had ever heard her make. She knew there were horses nearby and her life came up. WoW!

But it gets better.

My mob came thundering over, which caused more excited reaction from Annie. I led her into the adjoining paddock. There was sniffing and squealing going on through the fence, big time, and a lot came from her. She was scared and excited at the same time. Then she found grass and the special 'mix' I serve up now and then. So eating became a priority for her while the others buzzed around like kids around a newcomer at a school.



Annie before herd living.



Annie's stump.

The following morning I brought my old calm horse into Annie's paddock to look after her. Very unexpectedly he proceeded to chase her around quite aggressively. "Uh oh", was my reaction. But little Annie lined up the double barrels and Ben, shocked by this fire power, dodged and managed to keep a safe distance and remain unscathed. "Well at least she's moving" I thought. But it wasn't working so I swapped Ben for Dorrigo, the other calm gentleman. Same deal! Now these two old underdogs had someone else to pick on, and they did. Plan A. wasn't quite working out and I had to leave home and horses for a couple of days so on to plan B; which was open the gates and let eight curious horses come in and say hello.

'Pandemonium' would be the best word to describe the next five minutes. However no horse died, no blood was let and no hair was removed. It was a miracle really. Then the mob just took off. Into the next paddock at full gallop, performing a lap or two and then off into the next paddock where they disappeared over the hill. And bringing up the rear was poor little Annie, hobbling along as fast as she could (which wasn't really very fast at all), calling out "Wait for me". And I left it to the Gods.

Three days later I returned, wondering if she was still alive. She was. She was scar free and surprisingly one of the young horses, Murphy, had teamed up with her and was very caring and constantly giving her comfort. Another big "WoW!" for me. She had also burst a big abscess in her right front hoof. Her hooves had woken up, stirred up some infection and popped an abscess that wept for days. So it was off to the herbalist for



Snooze o'clock

some herbs to assist her body and mind to heal. She hated the first few mouthfuls mixed with apple juice but now hardly gives any resistance. Murphy usually stands by giving support during these administrations. She also ate a full steaming poo of Murphy's right in front of me. I was so tempted to stop her but in the back of my mind I felt she was doing it for a reason. A reason for her well-being.

After two weeks in company, she now trots. She has to, to keep up with eight healthy horses. Her lameness has reduced but not gone. Her coat is fluffing up, she loves a massage, her 'life' is up and I can't wait until her carer sees her. And Murphy absolutely loves her. She is nearly ready for another trim on her hooves as well. So far, so good. And the dentist has been booked.

After three weeks Annie's lameness has gone. She still doesn't move very well but she trots along quite nicely. She's had another trim on her front hooves, which are now looking like hooves instead of stumps. I give her the herb mix without even a halter on. And all the horses now accept her as part of the herd. Today she let me kneel down with her while she was snoozing and give her a gentle rub. At the five week mark, the horse in Annie returned. She moves like a horse. She seems to be much more comfortable. She's not 100% but I like what I see.



Annie after 3 weeks with the herd.

Another really good thing to come of this is that her human carer has been made aware of horses' needs. And she may well tell others of Annie's story, of how the vet said "Put her down" and the barehoof man said, "Put her with other horses". It is only early days and Annie has a fair amount of recovery to do from years of solo living and lack of appropriate care, but if her progress to date is any indication, then we may just have a happy, healthy pony to enjoy for many years to come. Her human carer wasn't being cruel, she just didn't know. She does now.

Because the decision and action of separating a horse from a herd and sentencing it to solitary confinement happens everywhere, and is commonplace, it is not recognised by many humans as a form of cruelty at all. But it is. It is so cruel that the horse on which this sentence has been imposed lives a life of emotional, social and spiritual deprivation. Quite often this manifests in mental and/or health problems leading to premature death. These horses' natural needs are far from being met. They live a life beset by fear, weighed down with depression, plagued with anxiety and they are in desperate need of help.

Because the sight of a horse living by itself is so common (and accepted by many humans as normal) the human/s responsible for the care of the horse, and the RSPCA, the veterinary world, and animal rights groups, for some reason do not see or understand the suffering these horses are silently enduring. So they do not take action to relieve this misery either and the status quo remains. This is very sad for horses, but surprisingly, quite easy to fix.

Understanding that a horse is a herd animal is the first step. In my work of barehoof care for horses, I place 'horse company' as the most important factor in the soundness of horse's hooves. Next on the list is terrain, followed by diet and finally hoof trimming. 'Horse company' usually translates to a socialised, well adjusted horse and just by being with other horses they are motivated to move around almost all day and night. If these horses are given a large enough space in which to move and explore, they will move a lot. And movement usually translates to a healthy, sound horse. They will play, they will squabble, they will tease and they will generally be much happier than if they lived solo. If the large space these horses live in is interesting and has logs, trees and branches on which to rub and scratch, all the better. If the surface is hard and rocky then hoof trimming will naturally occur as they get around. And if there is a dam or watercourse, the herd will have the opportunity to soak their hooves several times a day and also take a dip, splash or a full on wallow - all year round!

A fit, moving and agile horse usually has fit and capable hooves. A socialised horse usually has a fit and capable mind. These horses are usually placed in the 'sound' category. A better horse to have in your life, I'd say.

To a horse, there is safety in numbers. If they don't feel safe, they are not comfortable. If they are not comfortable they won't play or perhaps eat much either. And so the problems, mental and physical, escalate for the horse. Alternatively, some solo horses are so bored they just eat. Then they get fat, get laminitic, founder and then they are often locked up and starved. No movement and no food on an already seriously sick and often depressed horse. Then the advice is "put it down".

This is in stark contrast to life in the herd where I live.

They move around in a loose gaggle all day and night. Within the 'loose group' there are several 'relationships' whereby certain horses usually hang with certain other horses. And every now and then, some of them change partners. But the group, even the outsiders, the new horses or the unsound ones, operate and live as a herd.

They all eat together, they go to the beach together, they change paddocks together and they head off to the water trough together. A really good demonstration of the strength of herd dynamics is at snooze o'clock. At rest time, several of the horses lay down and zed off. But some always stay standing on guard, half dozing with one eye open, so to speak; on the lookout for the lurking predator. And that's usually me. These sentries position themselves in a way that the whole surrounding area is covered well and truly by the combined sets of eyes. Just keeping tabs on what's going on in the paddock.

This is impossible with a horse who lives on his own. He's always on guard. He can never really safely sleep on the ground or even standing for that matter. Constant alert. Constant worry or constant "I just give up on feeling safe". It's pretty sad for the horse really.

If you have one or two horses, or a herd, then adopt one of these sad solo horses. The difference between three and four horses is not all that great. The difference between eight and nine is less. The rewards of having a herd to care for are immense and far outweigh the costs.

For example, we can observe real live horse behaviour and learn from it. A live show is much better than any DVD or book. We can establish and develop our 'leadership' skills within a herd and then use those skills in our human herds. We can be entertained and enthralled by watching them gallop, dance, prance and play when the mood takes them and we can be totally blown away when a number of them actually compete for our attention. I mean, how good is it when one horse puts his ears back at another just to have your undivided attention. Or we can ease our way into the resting herd, lay down with the foal and have him flop his head in our lap and go fast asleep while Mum looks on with a caring eye. There is something quite special and memorable having a nearly two hundred kilogram prey animal snoring in your lap.

It can be greatly satisfying to 'match make' solo horses too. The most common scenario is one person has a solo horse that is fat, foundered, depressed or badly behaved. And another person has a horse that is no longer needed, useful (subjective term) or loved, or it is fat, foundered, depressed or badly behaved. And one person takes on the care of the other horse. Quite often the results are instant. It's almost as if they say "hey, another horse. Yippeeee!" "While I show you around my paddock, tell me about your life and we'll see if we can become mates".

I would love it if everyone who understands that horses are herd animals and believes they should not live solo lives starts spreading the word on just how important this is. We need to lobby vets, the RSPCA, pony clubs, the media, government departments, animal rights groups and anyone else within earshot. We need to change the way people think about horses. We need to become activists for the horse. We need to ensure they all live in herds again. And we need to meet the horse's needs. No ifs, no buts and no excuses!

Happy sound horses mean happy humans.