

"I was told she'd never be the same again"

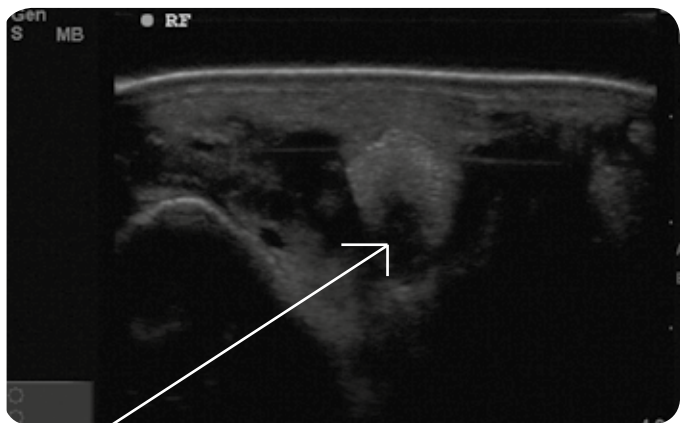
Bellhaven Paris:



They are the words that no rider wants to hear their vet utter: "suspensory ligament injury". Unfortunately, this was the reality for top WA young show jumping rider Annabel Cowcher and her successful mare Bellhaven Paris at the beginning of the 2014 season. Having just achieved the leading young rider at the 2013 Perth Royal Show and earning their place on the National Young Rider Squad, Annabel and Paris were 'riding high' - only to be cut down a in a cruel twist of fate.

Describing her mare as "quirky and sensitive", Annabel was unaware that the paddock antics she witnessed after working her one day would lead to such a catastrophic injury. In fact, like many other horse owners, she was entertained by the obvious display of freshness and energy from her horse.

Continued



Enlargement of the lateral branch of the suspension ligament. A grade 4 lesion is present taking up approximately 50% of the maximal cross sectional area.

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“She must have landed awkwardly, because the next day I went to work her she was ever so slightly lame... little did I know how seriously she had injured herself,” Annabel said.

It wasn't until four days later when the leg began to swell up that Annabel realised that the mild lameness might be more serious than she initially suspected. After rushing her to the vet, she was diagnosed with suspensory ligament desmitis in her right fore, with an ultrasound of the leg revealing a Grade 4 core lesion on the lateral branch. In other words, this was a potentially career ending injury for Paris - a devastating prognosis for Annabel.

“‘Suspensory’ is definitely a word no horse owner wants to hear when the vet is making a diagnosis,” Annabel said. “But that’s the word I heard, and that’s when my heart sank. I could see a big black hole showing on the screen in her suspensory where it should have been white. I think even my vet was surprised at what he found...I remember him saying he thought she should have been on three legs, not just slightly lame.”

The suspensory ligament runs down the back of the cannon bone from just below the knee (or hock), and its job is to support the fetlock joint as it sinks under weight. When the leg is overloaded, the ligament can give way; this may result in a mild injury if just a few collagen fibres tear, or a more severe one involving a rupture of the ligament. They are among the most common injuries/conditions affecting horses (second only to colic), and are renowned for being difficult to treat.

The severity of Paris’ injury made it clear that this was going to be a long road to recovery – if she were to heal at all. The recovery process can vary significantly depending on the extent of ligament tears, ranging from just 6-8 weeks for mild strains, to 8-12 months for more severe tears. Unfortunately, Paris was in the latter category – though Annabel was determined to give her the utmost chance of recovery.

“My vet tried to be as positive as he could about the prognosis, but it was quite clear she was going to need a long time to recover if she was ever going to,” Annabel said. “Naturally I was heartbroken, but was willing to do whatever I had to in order to give her the best possible chance of making a comeback.”

“We had vets in Europe look at her scans and were told that she had little hope of ever being the same horse she was before the injury. In fact, many told me just to put her in foal.”

Initially this involved icing her leg and letting her rest (no easy task for an active horse like Paris), as well as applying ‘Red Light Therapy’ - a technology that uses red and near-infrared light to promote healing and minimise pain. Six weeks after the initial injury, Annabel was delighted to hear that there was a small improvement and to keep doing what she was doing. However, four months and a great deal of hard work later, the prognosis was not so good.

“I was told at the four month stage that there had really been no improvement at all from the initial check up,” Annabel said. “We even had vets in Europe look at her scans to see if they had a different opinion, and were told that she had little hope of ever being the same horse she was before the injury. In fact, many told me just to put her in foal as she’d only be good as a broodmare from now on.”

Faced with the prospect of investing even more time and money for what would probably be a futile outcome, many owners at this stage would have thrown in the towel. After all, a well-bred mare like Paris would

be an asset to any breeding program and Annabel had another top horse coming through to compete on. However, Annabel wasn't going to give in that easily.

“Paris is a little mare, but she has the heart of a lion. She’s a real fighter and loves her job – she’s never let me down in the show ring”, Annabel said. “Whilst there were definitely days that the foal idea crossed my mind, I was always willing to do whatever I could to fix her.”

And so, displaying an attitude similar to her ‘small but mighty’ horse, Annabel persevered with Paris’ treatment. Unfortunately, that wasn't to be the end of their hardships. Soon after being told that she had shown little improvement, Annabel found out the vet who had been treating Paris was leaving. Having dealt with Paris’ injury all the way through, this was a disappointing turn of events; essentially they would have to start from scratch with a new vet.

Luckily for Annabel, however, she was soon able to find a new vet: Dr. Maxwell Hall. Unlike many of the other vets Annabel had consulted, he believed that there was still a chance for Paris, and suggested a procedure called Platelet Rich Plasma (PRP) therapy. A treatment that has gained a lot of respect among veterinarians recently, PRP involves drawing blood from the patient and placing it into a centrifuge machine to separate into components. The platelets are then removed and injected into the point of injury – for Paris, the lesion in her suspensory ligament. These platelets contain growth factors that may help accelerate the healing process, increasing the likelihood that it will heal completely and in a shorter period of time.

At over five months post injury, there was a chance that they had missed the boat with this treatment; ideally it is done within a month of the injury. However, they decided to go ahead with it, seeing it as their last option to ‘bring her back’. Following the procedure, she was given an extensive rehabilitation program that involved more rest and controlled exercise in the form of hand walking.

“The walking helped to align the fibres, and I was able to increase her daily walk by five minutes every fortnight,” Annabel said. “Three months post PRP I took her back for a scan and was totally over the moon with what I saw on the screen. The hole had filled in significantly and I was given the all clear to start walking her under saddle.”

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From there, Paris progressed quickly, flying through her ridden rehab program and performing better than ever on the flat. Seven months post PRP, Annabel was given the all clear to begin jumping her again.

“The first time I jumped her was rather nerve racking, as she was ridiculously fresh and excited – I was scared she would end up reinjuring herself”, Annabel said. “As it turned out, I had nothing to be worried about; she hasn't had a lame step since the PRP”.

Twelve months on and the future is looking bright for Paris and Annabel. Now back to the competition arena, Paris has competed in two shows for three wins - an impressive result for any horse, let alone one coming back from such a severe injury. But where to from here?

“Paris has already totally exceeded all the hopes I ever had for her,” Annabel said. “We’re still taking it slowly with her but I’d love to have her back jumping around the young rider classes for my last year as a young rider, and at the rate she’s going I think that’s possible.”

