

CaLSTAR – A fall from 14 hands high

By Lisa Jarvis

It was a beautiful day for horseback riding in March. The sky was a sharp blue, and a light breeze swept over the meadow grass, cooling Sharon Gonzalez and her riding partner, Petra Van De Hey, while they rode. The two were out riding a groomed trail, surveying a section of their employer's 1,300-acre private ranch outside of Mt. Aukum in El Dorado County. Every so often, they stopped to take pictures of the breathtaking scenery around the property for the owners who were out of town.

Sharon had chosen to ride Bosco that day – a Tennessee Walker/Peruvian Paso of 27 years. “He is the oldest and gentlest of horses, which is why he's my riding buddy,” says Sharon. “It was a day like any other.”



Bosco and Sharon Gonzalez

Photo/Sharon Gonzalez

Then, everything changed.

Twenty minutes into their ride, on a straight and level section of trail, something happened. Sharon cannot remember exactly what that "something" was, as her memory of the event eludes her to this day. However, she does remember awaking to find her face in the dirt. "At the time, I wasn't in any pain, but I couldn't move. I didn't know where I was or what was going on. And then I lost consciousness again."

Petra, who had been riding ahead of Sharon at the time, had just turned to say something over her shoulder and saw Bosco in mid-fall. The horse had been in good health and spirits that morning, and was not prone to misbehavior or accidents; but something had caused him to stumble hard, knocking Sharon to the ground in the fall. The force of the blow crushed her ankle, fractured her ribs, and caused her helmet to crack open and separate from its lining.

Kneeling beside her, Petra tried to determine the extent of Sharon's injuries, and soon realized that emergency services would be needed. The main ranch house was at least a mile away, and as in many remote regions, cellphone reception was unreliable for those in the area. The decision that Petra made next was both brave and terrifying. She would have to leave Sharon alone to find help.

"It's one of the few things I remember after the fall," states Sharon. "Petra very calmly said to stay still ... she was going to get help."

Miraculously, Bosco seemed uninjured by the fall, but Petra worried that he may accidentally injure Sharon further if left alone, so she got him up and tied him to her own horse for the ride back.

"I tried ponying him [i.e. lead a horse while riding another], but he was slowing us down. When we were far enough away, I threw Bosco's reins over his saddle horn and continued without

him, knowing he would either go find grass or go back to the barn," she added. Luckily, Petra had received wilderness/rescue training during her career, and she knew her decision to quickly locate help would ensure the best possible outcome for Sharon.

After riding back to the ranch, Petra sought the help of fellow co-worker, Stephanie—a retired ER nurse—who traveled back to look after Sharon while Petra called 911 and made her way out to the main road to direct first responders. By the time fellow caretakers Troy and Mandy McCabe arrived on site, paramedics were already caring for Sharon, and CalSTAR pilot—Harry Holt—was just landing the air ambulance in an adjacent field.

After nine minutes surrounded by emergency services, Sharon was stabilized for transport and loaded into the helicopter by EMS crews and CalSTAR flight nurses (Jeff Wallen and Heather Summerby). Nineteen minutes later, the CalStar team landed at Sutter Roseville Medical Center. Sharon remembers very little of the friends and first responders who had arrived to help her. In fact, other than the brief memories of being carried on a stretcher and flight nurse Jeff Wallen speaking to her before takeoff, Sharon remembers nothing of her preparation on the ground or her short flight.

She spent the next five days in the Neuro ICU at Sutter Roseville Medical Center, receiving treatment for her traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other injuries caused by the blunt force trauma.

"Never having been in a hospital before, I had nothing to compare it to," she says, "but I can tell you that the care I received at Sutter Roseville was completely beyond anything I expected. They treated me like a precious princess when I awoke. It was wonderful."

In a humorous turn, Sharon's physician was also named Bosco.

“When you’re in the hospital for a traumatic brain injury and your doctor shares the name of the horse that threw you, it can lead to some fairly amusing interactions between patient and hospital staff,” relays Sharon. “A horse is a horse, of course. Of course?”

“It’s still remarkable to me that I was only there for a week. After returning home, my emotions fluctuated greatly. Now, I’m feeling more like myself, although my sense of taste and smell is still a bit off. I understand that condition may improve with time.”

She credits her expedited recovery to the quick, multi-agency response of EMS crews, the CalSTAR flight crew, and her care at Sutter Roseville Medical Center. “At some point, I would love to reunite and thank everyone who cared for me. They are my life-savers.”

Has the accident affected her love of riding? “Absolutely not,” says Sharon, “although I will most likely never ride Bosco again because the reason for his fall could not be identified. He was vet-checked shortly after the accident, and other than biting his tongue, he suffered no injuries. To this day, we have no idea what caused his fall. It was simply a fluke.”

We can all learn a valuable lesson or two from an experience like this. “I want to encourage your readers to take every precaution when riding, even if they are experienced,” instructs Sharon. That includes the following:

- Never ride remotely alone. If you don’t have that option, tell friends or family where you are headed as well as the time they should expect you back.
- Take along safety/survival gear and a means of communication, if available.
- Most important, wear a helmet.

“One or all of these things may help save your life. Two saved mine.”

Lisa Jarvis works for CalSTAR.