

*What Did You Do Saturday Night?*

*By Deanna Hertrich*

*This eyewitness account of the October 27 horse trailer accident in Wadsworth, Illinois was written by Free Horse Farm's Deanna Hertrich, a board member of the Illinois Dressage and Combined Training Association*

October 27th, 2007: It had been a great Saturday, with perfect Midwest fall weather and a day full of accomplishments. I had been able to ride three horses on the farm, one being my two-and-a-half year old, Boo, for the fourth time of his life, and another my twenty-year-old event horse, who was given a light day of dressage and is still feeling very good after a full season of shows.

I consider myself and my family "horsey". We own a small horse farm--of which I am the full time staff. I compete in combined training as well as dressage. Kevin, my partner, is also very active; not only is he a DVM practicing with Bristol Veterinary

Service (must mention Wisconsin Veterinarian of the Year for 2007) but also he competes in the sport of combined driving.

Our three-year-old son, Nathan, enjoys his pony, and is always looking forward to the next opportunity to saddle up.

It was just after seven in the evening. I had made dinner and we were just winding down. I even had my shower done; only task left was figuring what would be good to watch on the television. It was Kevin's weekend on call.

Then the pager went off, not at all unusual for this time of the evening as it had done just thirty minutes before. Kevin was sharing calls with Dr. Steve Graham; Steve taking the Illinois calls, Kevin the Wisconsin calls.

As Kevin called back the service, I lingered about to find out what was up and where he would have to go. The service had a bizarre message, some sort of tractor-trailer accident in Newport. It was all a bit strange as neither of us knew what or where Newport was and why would they be talking about a semi wreck?

Kevin called the number the service provided him and was answered by the Newport Fire and Rescue department. They proceeded to inform him they had a semi tractor-trailer rollover on Highway 41 and Wadsworth Road in Wadsworth, Illinois. Still a bit confused, they continued to say that there were 59 horses on board.

Needless to say we were shocked. I immediately asked should I come along, answered very quickly with a "yes". I rushed about getting clothes on, our three-year-old dressed and portable DVD packed while Kevin kept calling his associates, rounding up whomever he could.

We were on the scene moments before seven-thirty. Kevin had called Steve (Dr. Graham), instructing him to stop at the clinic on his way to stock up on supplies.

Our vet truck pulled right up to the over-turned cab; it was lying across both lanes northbound, the median and two lanes of the southbound highway.

As we approached the trailer, the rescue departments had already erected a substantial round pen about the rear of the trailer; it was made of large chain-link panels draped with tarps. We were escorted through a section to the rear.

As we walked through there was kicking and banging from inside the trailer. The velocity was so great that the roof, which was what was facing us, was moving and bulging with every kick. Approaching the rear, the rescue squad was already sawing the back door apart. With the truck and trailer completely on its side, there was no accessible door.

By then many local horse enthusiasts had arrived. There were trailers lined up and ready to roll. People were bringing blankets, halters and leads. Most important: people were willing to risk their safety for the already-endangered animals. Never was there a shortage of help, physical or mental. Everyone worked as a team and I consider of all things, if it had to happen, how fortunate it happened in such an involved, aware and supportive horse community.

Eternity was what it felt like. Finally the section rescue was working on gave way and facing all was a challenge to behold. It would have been the bottom level of the trailer; my understanding (and from what I could see) it was a double-decker trailer, meaning that it had two levels. It was a sea of animals, down and intertwined.

Dr. Koehler, who also is a local DVM, had heard the news and arrived; he and Kevin went in to try and figure a plan. Nothing was easy, and by no means pretty. If I recall correctly, the first horse off was pulled out, and I also believe it was euthanized by the end of the night.

The situation just turned from bad to worse. It became efforts of passion. The goal was to get all out and as soon as we could. As the first compartment was cleared, those horses that could stand were given the chance. I would grab the halter, hold the head and neck straight, position the front legs out and all helping would hoist the animal up. If they could stand, we would support them as we moved them away from the scene to a makeshift triage. There they were met by loving hands, warm blankets and kind hearts.

I would imagine by the look of the horses, they would have never experienced this type of love, ever. It appeared that all were Belgian, Belgian crosses and some Percherons. There were a few ponies, some sort of Haflinger crosses and maybe some Quarter horse crosses.

All the tails had been docked; they all had hip numbers from auction and very recent hip brands. About eighty to ninety percent were yearlings and two year olds. Although they were young, they were big. I would lead one out with two fireman supporting the hind end and think wow, this is a tall horse! They just kept coming, those few that could stand, and most physically pulled out.

The second compartment had been opened. I refer to it as a compartment because it was no better than that. With the trailer on its side it was so hard to understand what was what; there were all these partitions that you could not make sense of nor open.

Rescue had decided that the best way to the rest would be through the roof. It was an onslaught of noise and commotion; I could only imagine what those horses were going through. Once again we started emptying that section just as the first.

By then the rescue squad had devised a makeshift horse stretcher. Somewhere they had produced full sheets of three-quarter-inch plywood; they sawed holes through the end through which ropes were placed.

Now we were sliding horses out the roof, which had been folded down to the pavement. Again, most were pulled to safety; those that couldn't stand were rolled over onto the stretcher and pulled out to triage. Maybe a few walked out of that compartment.

It was just so surreal. There was never a moment that I was not attached to a horse, putting on a halter, holding legs still, bracing a head and mostly pulling bodies about. Other rescue personnel were then working on freeing a section again at the rear of the trailer. Enclosed there were four weanlings or small yearlings. They were bonded together like glue and standing upright. The space they were in could not have been any bigger than a small dog kennel, with a quarter of the height. I would check them periodically as we kept removing others from the adjacent compartment. Easily I could see them through the slats; they stood like statues above all the noise, sparks and commotion. About the same time the one section was empty the little ones were closer to freedom. They came out as a group and it took quite a few hands to get the oversized halters on their little heads.

That group I helped lead to the awaiting trailers, and just like all the rest they jumped straight on, never a hesitation.

Meanwhile Kevin and Dr. Koehler were having a rough time with two mares remaining in the first side. One had her hoof trapped through the slats under the trailer and the other wanted nothing to do with rescue and took a couple good swings at Kevin, landing one on his thigh and the next on his wrist. With much struggle, they both were tranquilized and left to settle for further evaluation on their removal. Dr. Steve Graham and Dr. Leslie Szalla, who is also on Bristol's staff and arrived as soon as she heard of the accident, were managing the triage and doing the best they could. Thankfully they had enough willing help and many experienced equine people.

It was on to a new section; yet another partition in the way. Rescue once again sawed the gate in half, the top section was pulled up and tied back while the bottom half was attached to the ground, which would have been the side of the trailer.

This is when I finally started to give. There pinned against what would have been the floor of the top section and also along what would have been the side of the trailer was a horse each side. The gap they were pinned in could have been no larger than eight inches. One was trapped by its neck; the other had hind legs on one side and body on the other. I am sure that they came to their demise during the flip, and I never saw them move. However, that was not the worst for me.

I believe it was some form of the Jaws of Life that removed the remaining barricade to expose the rest of the trapped horses. My heart literally sank and I wanted to walk away. What appeared was a cavity filled with horses lying on their sides. I would have guessed anywhere between fifteen and twenty-some were in there. They were laying three to four deep, and hiding in the back were two standing. I could not tell what they were standing on but figured it had to be their comrades.

I turned to the rescue person at my side and said I don't even know where to start. There were legs everywhere; you could not tell what was with whom. The only thing distinguishable was their groaning as steam rose up from their tired overstressed bodies. An occasional movement would catch your eye, and we all stood there for a minute not knowing what to do.

Finally I crawled in at the lead from another man and haltered one, the first head we saw move. As we tried to hoist him up we realized his legs were under two or three others. Finally, we went back to the two dead and started to remove them to get to the others.

Before we could get the first one out, this commotion started from the back, and more groaning and kicking. I looked up to see one of those standing, from the back,

walking across the bodies. He came straight to us, placed his head in the halter and walked out of that wreck.

I was again invigorated and continued with diligence and hope. Had that animal not made the effort, I might have walked away. I knew now that I could not give up.

That was the worst compartment: not many walked out of there. By then more of the roof and the back half had been removed. We were able to roll horses out of the wreck and straight onto the stretchers. Caution was taken with the metal; sharp edges were covered by winter blankets, brought out by volunteers, to prevent more damage and pain to the horses. The roof folded down to the pavement like a cheap beer can. With all the condensation and manure it was very difficult to walk on let alone drag horses out of there.

As we all sorted through the bodies an occasional round of cheer and applause would be heard. It was quite disconcerting as I thought, what could be happy here? I would turn my head to the volunteers outside as one more battered body arose to the loving arms and support of their rescuers. My heart would smile.

On to the last compartment; this would have been the section above the truck. The easiest way in there was yet through another partition. Again the sawing and cutting; once open I asked the chief if there was one down on the left. I got the happy reply that no, they were all up. I believe there were about seven or eight in there, almost adult size.

In order to assure they could walk out safely, the unused stretchers were placed on the floor of the trailer and one over the folded down roof for an easy walk to the pavement. They were haltered by the Newport chief, and one by one lead down the busted up hull.

I informed the people along the cut roof line to form a human wall to prevent any horse from wanting to leave at a spot that was too low for clearance; it sported quite a jagged and dangerous edge. About eight of us stood there as each horse walked to safety; it was unbelievable that they would continue to trust and obey.

The last two mares on the bottom side were finally sedated enough and both came out; they were the last.

Assessment was ongoing in triage, and now all the vets' attention was out there. Evaluations were made; those that had injuries too grave to overcome were kindly euthanized and quietly left the scene with the peace and love of their human rescuers. The site itself is unimaginable and I will spare anymore details. As for exact numbers I can't even tell.

That night was a blur; it took all-in-all about five hours to remove all the horses from the wreck. I think that is pretty incredible. Yes, more could have been saved if we could have gotten to them. Rest assured all was done to do so. I have never seen such teamwork in total strangers, and the rescue departments were wonderful. Those fire fighters and rescue personal were never hesitant; they understood the desperation of the animals and compassionately worked to free them.

I feel I can safely say that no human was even injured, despite the horses thrashing about and the dangerous conditions of the wreck. I will say that every muscle in my body aches, and I would imagine most people involved would say the same.

It is the power of the human spirit and the fight for our animals that create the miracle. Why did I write about this? No particular reason but to share an experience. We all can imagine what the fate of these animals was, what will happen to them now remains a mystery. When these incidents happen, and they have happened before, those directly involved seem to disappear like the lives of these magnificent animals. It was only a year ago that an identical incident happened outside St. Louis, about the

same amount of living and dead from what I recall hearing. I guess all I ask is to give it some thought. Although you may think the answer is easy, therein lies the catch.

If it appears that I am talking in circles, I am; intending not to turn this into being an editorial or position, just a life experience. Be aware, be practical and be conscientious. Most of all is be keepers of the animals.

I was to be at a horse trial that weekend. Up until two weeks before the accident I was still on and off about going. However, I was tired; it was late in the year and my partner and I had already had a great season. I opted out. Now I know why the decision was made for me. My destiny was to help those animals with the countless others that arrived at the scene.

The gratification and reward was far better than any blue ribbon I could have won. We all received the biggest prize that evening, the privilege of helping these defenseless animals, the opportunity to experience humanity at its best and even some of God's miracles.

What did *you* do Saturday night?