

# Tales of the Unexpected

Readers tell us their true-life stories

## When the

**W**e've all heard stories of horses falling through trailer floors, but it's one of those things that you never think is going to happen to you. Especially when you're careful to look after your horse's transport. But little did H&R reader

**Caroline Miller** know, what she thought was a safe, well-maintained trailer was actually an accident waiting to happen, and one that would leave her beloved mare, **Lisa**, with life-threatening injuries. **Caroline** continues the story...



A massive noise came from the trailer and I saw wood flying from the back of it

On the morning of Sunday 15 June 2014, I went to my instructor, Mark Jackson's yard for a lesson, which is only five miles away. As we had an early start, I hitched up and checked the trailer's tyres and lights the night before, and everything was fine. We had a brilliant lesson and on the way home I was looking forward to telling my husband how much progress we'd made that morning. It seemed our first dressage test could be in sight.

### Crash to the floor

I was only about 300 yards from home on a quiet country road and had just gone around a right-angled bend, so luckily I was travelling slowly. There was a massive noise coming from the trailer and when I looked in my mirror, I saw wood flying from the back of it. I stopped immediately and ran to the front ramp to let it down.

I was confronted by a terrible sight. My beautiful girl was down on the floor with her head and neck under the breast bar, and her knees out in front. The trailer floor appeared to have given way. For some reason, the string she was tied to didn't snap, but Lisa was amazing and stopped struggling to let me take her headcollar off, which was difficult because of the tension on the rope.

Next, I went around to the jockey door to see if I could lift up the breast bar, although it was hard with her under it. Lisa made two massive efforts and managed to get herself out, then walked down the ramp and stopped at the bottom while I put her headcollar back on. She didn't even panic.

A quick look at her told me she'd lost her off-hind shoe (something I was puzzled by) and had some minor cuts and abrasions, and a really nasty injury to her near-hind fetlock. She seemed able to walk on it and as there was nobody around and no mobile signal, I made the decision to try to walk her the few hundred yards back home so I could call the vet and get her to a safe place. We took it slowly, but she started to go into shock.

### Devastating injury

As soon as I got her home, I put Lisa in her stable and rang the vet. Until then, I had managed to

Imagine the horror of opening the trailer and finding your horse on the floor – a nasty experience one H&R reader went through

## bottom dropped out

remain calm but on the phone I began to feel myself unravelling. The vet, Kate Smith, calmed me down and gave me things to do, such as hose the wound. The time until Kate arrived passed in a blur. Lisa had begun to shake, so I put on a rug to keep her warm and as comfortable as I could. Other than that, there wasn't much I could do.

Kate was kind and talked to me the whole time, explaining what she was doing and why. What she didn't know was that I have a phobia that results in me passing out when faced with almost anything medical. However, only a few months before, I'd learnt a technique to prevent me passing out, and it worked!

Kate explained that she needed to find out whether the joint capsule in Lisa's fetlock was damaged. She injected fluid into the side of the joint and we saw it come out through the hole at the front of her leg – this was bad news. Kate was straight on the phone lining up the team to operate that afternoon. This meant that Lisa would have to go to the equine centre in Morpeth.

### Emergency surgery

Luckily, Lisa loaded fine to go to the equine centre, and when we arrived I said my goodbyes and left her in their capable hands. It was a long wait, but eventually I received the call to say the operation had gone well. I could feel myself not hearing much of the detail and the tears were welling up – I was relieved the initial phase had gone well, but terrified that things would go wrong.

Ed Chinn, the surgeon, seemed really pleased with how the operation had gone, but explained to me that the next five to seven days were critical. There was a real chance that infection could take hold and they may have to operate again. The positive was that Lisa wasn't lame on the leg and although it didn't mean that she wouldn't be lame at the end of it all, it was a bonus at that point.

As each day went by, it seemed more and more

likely that Lisa was going to get through those critical first days – and she did! So then discussions moved to the next stage of the treatment. A plaster was put on Lisa's leg to help immobilise the joint and speed up the healing process.

The plaster came off after a fortnight (top right). It was difficult to get off but once Kate had cleaned the wound up, we could see a huge difference (right). The leg has been bandaged since, and we've been discussing what happens next. We could put a plaster back on for another couple of weeks, but we're going to see how the wound heals without it, and so far so good.

Once the wound has healed, we're going to start with steroid injections into the joint, but if they don't work there are other options we can try. I just pray that Lisa can be ridden again – a dressage career awaits her!

### Faulty materials

As for the trailer (right), I mentioned that Lisa's shoe was missing when I got her out and that I was puzzled by it. When we were travelling to Morpeth, we received a call to say someone had found her shoe about half a mile before the point where I knew the floor had failed. I was puzzled as I'd not heard or felt anything there. But the next day while travelling to work, I discovered what had actually happened.

About a mile-and-a-half from

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Lisa's fetlock had been dragged along the road, causing extensive damage

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home, there were little bits of wood in the road, indicating that the floor started to go there. Then a few hundred yards on, a very large piece of floor had given way. Her off-hind foot appeared to have gone through here, but she must have pulled it back up and pulled her shoe off in the process. Then she must have balanced on what was left until the whole floor gave way catastrophically!

I'd recently had my trailer floor replaced by a local coachbuilder and had not used it more than a dozen times since, and only for short journeys. So on my list of potential risks for the trip, my trailer floor failing didn't even feature.

The materials used were sub-standard and had absorbed moisture throughout. Lisa hadn't been to the toilet in there since it had been replaced, so the problem had been caused by atmospheric moisture. The company that

replaced the floor is devastated and has accepted responsibility. The materials should have been waterproof, but it seems they were supplied with non-waterproof materials and I'm certain there was no intention to do a poor job.

## Lessons learnt

I had always assumed you would hear a trailer floor giving way, but after talking to various people, it seems this is not necessarily the case, so I will always travel with a camera in future. I've also learnt that even a new floor needs to be checked monthly, although manufacturers don't necessarily make it easy and sometimes you need to get underneath the trailer to inspect it. We still have a long road to travel until we know what the final outcome will be for Lisa, but I'm optimistic that my wonderful, beautiful girl will recover to lead a useful and active life.

## Veterinary viewpoint

Vet Kate Smith, from Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group, tells us more about the seriousness of Lisa's injury...

As an equine vet, many calls are challenging and, 'My horse has fallen through the trailer floor' has to be pretty near the top of the list. Lisa's hindleg had gone through the trailer floor and the front of the fetlock had been dragged along the road, resulting in a deep wound. I set out to investigate whether the wound communicated with the joint because this had serious implications for both the treatment plan and prognosis.

The easiest way to determine whether the two are connected is to inject the joint with sterile saline and see if it leaks out of the wound. This has to be done very carefully to ensure infection isn't introduced into what may be an uninfected joint. Unfortunately, saline did trickle out of the wound. Infection in the joint of the horse is very serious because the immune system is unable to clear the infection without help. We needed to get Lisa to the clinic for surgery.

### Life-saving treatment

Once we had anaesthetised Lisa, we placed an arthroscope into the joint (see right) which allowed us to visualise the joint surfaces, and flush large volumes of saline through to remove any debris and infection. The damaged area was also trimmed back to healthy tissue. Unfortunately, an area of the cartilage had been damaged where it had scraped on the road and this is likely to be one of the main factors affecting whether Lisa will be sound. And as there was a large area of skin and joint capsule missing, it wasn't possible to close the wound with sutures (see right).

Over the next few days, Lisa was given antibiotics and had a regional limb perfusion. This is where we place a tourniquet on the limb and infuse antibiotics into a vein in the area, allowing us to get a lot of antibiotics into the synovial fluid and the tissues affected by the wound. We monitored her very carefully for signs of lameness that would tell us the infection had returned. It is very common to have to perform the surgery again, so we were thrilled as the days passed and Lisa remained sound at walk.

Wounds over joints are very slow to heal, largely due to movement. By stabilising and reducing the flexion of the joint, the wound would heal much more quickly, so we put a cast on Lisa's leg. When the cast was removed, there was a marked improvement in the wound, which had granulated (filled in) nicely, and she was sound at walk. Lisa is making great progress, but it's going to be a long, slow road to recovery.

We've had a couple of cases recently where horses have fallen through trailer floors, with very serious consequences. We can't overemphasise how important it is to check the floor regularly and have any work or servicing done by a qualified person.

