

### ***Heartbreaking end to Merlin's Kentucky quest, but KJ turns a corner in his progress.***

*by Emily Flaxman*

This month it all came crashing down.

I had been feeling so positive and hopeful as things were starting to go in the right direction. Shortly after I submitted my column for last month's issue, Merlin's knee swelled up. He wasn't lame on it and because there was obvious heat we assumed he had bumped it or been kicked by his pasture buddy. So the usual treatment of icing and liniment was started.



The swelling didn't go down but he was still sound on it and this lasted about two weeks. Then one day he came out and was clearly not 100 percent sound on it, so he had the day off and the next day I popped him on the lunge to see how he was. A little worse. The vet was due out the next week for another horse so we decided to have him looked at in the same visit.

Because the swelling had persisted for over two weeks and he was now lame, it was clear it wasn't a kick. I knew he had had knee injections during his race career, so the obvious problem was that the joint needed a little help again.

I'm not a fan of over-medicating joints, but once you have started down that route it's not fair to the horse to stop. My vet came on the Tuesday and, looking at the knee, felt that it was best to take radiographs to really see what was going on.

## September 2016 - My Thoroughbred Makeover

Written by Emily Flaxman

Wednesday, 31 August 2016 20:24

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I have a great relationship with my vet so we were chatting away and laughing while he took the slides. When they came up on the screen though, his face suddenly went very serious. Things did not look good.

Actually, things looked downright terrible.

The knee is a very complicated joint with many bones interacting within it. Between the long bones on the forearm and cannon, there are two layers of small bones. At every gap between bones, Merlin had severe arthritic changes. There were bone spurs, fusion and possibly even chips. It was beyond help.

To inject again would open us up to the risk of infection, as all joint injections do. Plus, at this point, with how bad the arthritis was, we would only be injecting to squeeze a few more months of work out of him. The injection wouldn't help repair or sustain the joint: it would only temporarily cover the pain. Ethically, medicating a horse in order to compete really is questionable at best.

The prognosis was dire. He might be able to live on but as a companion horse. But the housing situation would need to be flat, preferably small and possibly solitary. Finding a companion home for a hard-to-keep, giant, ulcer-prone Thoroughbred is tougher than finding a unicorn. So the only real option was to do the humane thing and give him a dignified end, free of pain.

I don't enjoy having these events hang over me for weeks, so the decision was made to have him put to sleep on Thursday.

We were all devastated, obviously. It's the worst choice to have to make and a horrible thing to witness. Everyone at my barn spoilt him rotten that morning and, in the end, he went over the rainbow bridge fat, shiny, happy, loved and with a belly full of carrots. Which is the best we can provide as loving horse owners.

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I'm so sad that he never got to Kentucky to show the world what a fabulous boy he was, but so glad that he had six wonderful months of retirement from racing. He taught me lots and I'll forever be grateful to him for that.

### Much Better News With KJ

My other boy KJ, thankfully, is doing great. It's like something has clicked in him and he finally gets the concept of being between leg and hand. His topline is starting to develop and he is really using his back under saddle. The transitions are getting smoother, and we are almost able to change directions without his head pinging up.

I'm starting to feel we might not embarrass ourselves when we show in Lodi in mid-August. I'm excited to see how he handles the atmosphere, and what the judges think of him. I have a feeling that because all the Kentucky competitors know how high the standard was last year, they will all be raising the bar this time around. So we are going to have to really bring our A game if we want a chance of being in the top 10 in at the Thoroughbred Makeover in October.

It's been a tough month, with a good emotional kicking thrown in, so I'm really hoping KJ continues to do well in his training. For now I'm just keeping my nose to the grindstone and pushing through it.

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*Columnist Emily Flaxman uses dressage as a foundation for training OTTBs and other breeds from her base in the East Bay Area's Clayton. She trained Go Wheeler Go to top finishes in her first Thoroughbred Makeover last year (California Riding Magazine, January 2016). Emily is detailing her preparation for this year's Thoroughbred Makeover, in late October in Kentucky, in our pages. To learn more about Emily, visit [www.emilyflaxman.com](http://www.emilyflaxman.com). For more on the Thoroughbred Makeover, visit [www.retiredracehorseproject.com](http://www.retiredracehorseproject.com)*

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