

Gulliver's Grass Sickness

On the evening of Tuesday, May 15th 2007, I walked out into our field in the Eden Valley, Cumbria to take a look at our horses. We have a 21 year old part-bred mare, a coloured warmblood yearling and Gulliver, a handsome dark brown warmblood gelding who was just coming up to 4 years old. I had just backed him and was looking forward to a summer of riding and perhaps showing if he was a good pupil. Unfortunately, I found a very fed up looking horse, who was tucked up and sweating and showing signs of discomfort, so I brought him in to have a better look.



Gulliver in summer 2006 as a 3 year old

In the stable, he started shaking showing mild signs of colic, so I decided to call the vet. Over the last week, he had been his normal self, but had been dropping food and was slower and slower in eating his small feeds, so I had presumed that given his age, he was changing teeth and so hadn't called the vet straight away. The vet arrived within an hour and I remember saying 'if I didn't know better, it looks a little like grass sickness!' to which I got the unwelcome reply, 'yes, I would say so too'. I was quite stunned, but at that point didn't really know all the implications. The vet's diagnosis was that it was 'the mildest case of grass sickness' she had seen at that point and she hoped that he wouldn't go much further downhill. She told me that their practice was treating six cases of EGS in the area, all of which had occurred within a week. With difficulty, we tubed him and he had only a small amount of gastric reflux, so that was another good sign. He had a temperature, so she suggested that he might also have a case of colitis, so he was prescribed intra-muscular antibiotics which, given that he had become very sensitive in his skin, were a nightmare to give him over the following week.



16th May, one day after diagnosis – looking depressed and tucked up

The next week was a downhill spiral – the only thing he would eat was carrots and we had to leave him over the weekend with a friend as we had to go to my partner’s Father’s funeral – we were not having a good time. During the week of the 21st, he stopped eating carrots and was losing weight rapidly. I had started to put him back out in the field quite soon after his diagnosis – he would still pick at grass and given that we do not know what causes the disease, it seemed that not allowing him to eat the only thing he wanted, after the damage had already been done, was nonsensical. He also developed the shiny, smooth coat that is often associated with the disease.



22nd May – one week after diagnosis – note wither protruding, loss of weight on rump and neck

The vet was back out within the week and again we tried to tube him, but failed as he kicked up such a fuss even with sedation. He had the associated runny nose, *rhinitis sicca*, but didn’t have too much in the way of gastric reflux. His heart rate was elevated, and he had virtually stopped passing faeces and urine. The vet wasn’t very positive; she had hoped he wouldn’t deteriorate much over the first week, but he wasn’t looking good. The one positive thing was that out on daily walks in the village, he was interested and passing other horse’s scents and muck encouraged him to try and go to the loo. His sense of smell seemed diminished and that seemed to affect what he wanted to try in his mouth. His urine, when passed, was amazingly smelly and thick given that he was ingesting so little liquid, while his faeces was small and covered in sticky mucus. Trying to keep him clean was a nightmare – with the majority of his thermoregulation lost, sweat crusted all over his thin summer coat and without washing, formed an impermeable barrier to all but a curry comb; he was still very sensitive, not wanting to be groomed.

At this point I hit rock bottom; we had already had a death in the family and now we were losing the horse I had been working with since he was six months old, it was a horrible situation for us all. I spent the afternoon after the vet came out moping and not being able to believe that we might lose my beautiful young horse into whom I had put so much time and effort. I knew that to give him the chance to survive, the next few weeks were going to be tough both mentally and physically, with no guarantee our efforts would be rewarded, but we pulled ourselves out of our nadir and made the decision to do everything we could to see him through the ordeal. I was lucky in that I work from home, so the full time job that it became to look after him was possible. I read everything I could on the subject of EGS and sourced Aloe Vera juice from a health food shop to sooth his gut, we bought Actimel drinks and the vet gave us a gut probiotic powder. He was on Bute to help with any pain that he had and it was making a paste of the bute, then syringing it in to his mouth to make sure he ate it that gave us the idea to syringe food into him. We also fed molasses and every feed had copious amounts of vegetable oil mixed in. I spoke to Joyce Mackintosh at the EGS unit for moral support and had a lovely e-mail from the nurse at the unit.

We started on a small scale; I bought some porridge oats and we found a 100ml syringe and fed him oats 4 times a day. He was an unwilling patient, but we were lucky, as if we got the food into his mouth, he swallowed and didn't choke too much. A lot of horses lose their swallow reflex and syringing is impossible, but we were lucky in this respect. It was a battle, but we were getting around 2 kgs of food into him a day, plus all the associated potions. I spoke to the EGS nurse in Edinburgh and she gave me encouragement, but told me we needed to get at least 4 – 5 kilos into him a day to maintain him. His temperature had finally dropped, so the injections could stop, so that was one less stress on his body and for me too.

The porridge was fine, but we couldn't get it in bulk and it didn't really contain everything he needed in terms of nutrients, so we bought racehorse cubes and Baileys no. 4 cubes and soaked them. They made a really sloppy pulp that we could syringe, so we gradually upped his feed until he was having 5 syringe feeds a day, each taking 30 – 45 minutes to administer, and got his intake up to 5 kilos a day. I am a research scientist by trade and work with a few doctors. One explained the nervous innervation of the gut to me, and I learned that even if large numbers of nerves in the gut were dead, if we could stimulate the gut, sort of kick start it again, then Gully would have a better chance, so the fact we were getting food into him and all the walks he was getting, would definitely help. He was still dropping weight; we knew that it would take a while for his body to 'bounce' back.



June 1st – approx. 3 weeks in.

At this point, he was passing faeces more regularly, though it was sloppy, and starting to urinate again, so things were looking up though he wouldn't even entertain eating any hard feed for himself. I stood for ages in the evenings watching him in the field, willing him to do more than pick at grass.

I then had to go away to work; I was gutted that I had to leave him, but I couldn't let my contractor down and was scheduled to be away for 2 weeks. In my absence, my Dad agreed to come across and help Tom. The vet made several visits while I was away and Dad rang with reports. On the 20th of June at 5 weeks in, the Vet wasn't very pleased with his progress. Dad was upset, as he felt she thought that Gully was going further downhill and from his looks, you could understand why. However, Dad and Tom had made a breakthrough – Gully was now actively taking food himself, almost sucking it from the syringe and so they felt that he must be on the mend.



June 20th – at his worst, but starting to take more feed.

I continued to get great phone reports from Dad and Tom, and on my return home on June 23rd I could see a huge difference. The vet came out on the 25th and she was amazed at the change in him. We were both almost in tears; I had been holding my breath, as I thought he had put on weight, but wanted to see what she thought and she was astounded at his progress.



Gully 7 weeks into EGS, June 29th – note this photo taken only 9 days after the previous one, when at his worst. His stomach, rump and neck all starting to fill out.

We continued with his routine and he continued to put on weight. On July 2nd, the Vet decided we didn't require her services any more - Gully was officially recovering. The next problem was to wean him off the syringe. It had definitely served its purpose, but was very tiring having to stand for 30 minutes to administer each feed and messy, but Gully was loathe to give up his 'baby' feeding, standing at the back of his stable, opening the side of his mouth like a baby bird and refusing to entertain the thought of putting food into his mouth himself. We had been warned that weaning could be difficult, but in fact, it was perhaps the most frustrating part of the whole process. We knew he was getting better, so the worry was gone, but he was still refusing, from a human's anthropomorphic point of view, to help himself. So we gave him time. We stuck with it, until he looked as if a few days without food while weaning him, if necessary, would not compromise his

body weight. Finally, at about 11 weeks in, he started feeding himself. He was still on sloppy food and continues to favour that over dry nuts or mixes, but I am quite happy to soak feeds for him for as long as he wants. He is now grazing normally and everything else, apart from his temperature regulation, is back to normal. He still sweats in direct sunlight and it is difficult to keep him clean, particularly as he suffers from sweet itch and needs to be rugged.

In the first week of October 2007, I brought him back into work. Another vet came to give him his annual jabs and told me he was fat! He worked on the lunge and I sat on him for the first time since May, which was a marvellous feeling and such a relief. All of the other horses that my Vet's practice treated at the same time as Gully didn't make it; in fact, I discovered that none of the vets at the practice had ever seen a horse or pony come through EGS – a sobering thought. We know we were lucky, both in terms of the severity of Gully's illness and that we were able to give him the time and the care he needed to pull him through. I am of course worried about Cassie and Sky, my other horses, but all we can do is hope that EGS doesn't re-occur in our field, so this winter we tried to do everything to minimise the proposed risk factors. I will always now provide a lick in the field and try to minimise exposure of the soil through poaching, though it is difficult in just 3 acres. Other than that, we will just have to keep our fingers crossed, as it was an ordeal that I wouldn't want to go through again. My heart goes out to all of the other EGS victims and their owners, particularly those I was in touch with during the summer. I would like to thank all of those that helped look after Gully, including the vets at Frame, Swift and Partners at Penrith, my partner Tom and Dad, who all rallied round to help. It was definitely worth it.



Gully on August 12th showing the strange coat he developed after EGS.



Gully on September 12th – about to go back into work with a fair covering on him!

23rd May 2008-05-23 Post script

Below is a photo of Gully taken on May 20th 2008, just over a year since he contracted EGS. He is doing really well under saddle and doesn't seem to have stamina issues. He is completely back to himself though I still feed sloppy feeds – in fact all three horses now have soaked nuts as part of their feed as they love it and the high water content can only be beneficial.



Photo courtesy of Margaret White.