

MEETING MR DARCY

Tall, dark and handsome, just like his literary namesake – that's Mr Darcy, a 16.2hh black Irish Thoroughbred. His owner, Becky, first contacted me a couple of years ago when I was practising in Somerset, England. The story was that she had taken the 14-year-old from an acquaintance at the close of his long hunting career. She had not been put off by his badly collapsed hooves, twisted near foreleg and marked tendency to bolt whenever his hooves touched open countryside. She had seen something in his character that she liked, so that was it.

Upon meeting 'Mr D', that attraction was easy to understand. His presence was considerable and he displayed an engaging curiosity in his visitor. What was immediately evident upon looking him over was that the horse had been badly used. Sadly, this is the case with many (but certainly not all) working hunters in the UK, which are expected to hammer along tarmac roads and tear across fields, walls, hedges and ditches for hours at a time, with no particular care being given to their physical needs in between these extended stints. Many horses love hunting, of course – imagine the adrenalin rush of that huge herd dash – but many of the 'full-timers' carry pain as well. Such is the nature of horses like Mr D, with their physical strength, large hearts and courageous spirits, that they continue to work hard and do what is asked despite the presence of conditions that might be debilitating in another horse.



Mr Darcy - tall, dark and handsome!

Becky's eyes were fully open to the effects of that twisted knee and collapsed hooves from the start. She had embarked on a period of rehabilitation, launching herself onto a steep learning curve at the same time. Remedial farriery was building up his hooves, while a new nutritional regime had gradually improved his condition until that black coat was gleaming. The equine vet had thoroughly checked the deformed knee and had been impressed enough by its severity to take photos to show his students at the nearby veterinary college. Mr D was clearly a remarkable case!

In the meantime, horse and rider had started having regular lessons together. The partnership was coming on well, although Becky still described Mr D as "somewhat fast". Typically of Becky, a quiet and rather fragile-looking woman, that was a bit of an understatement. In those early days, many of their rides would involve a flat-out, uncontrolled gallop at some point. These were so hair-raising at times that by the time I met them, nobody at their stables would ride out with them.

My first visit was on a calm summer's day. It was immediately clear that Mr Darcy's feet had been poor from an early age, meaning that his near knee had developed with a permanent twist. This had then had a compensatory impact on his entire body. Unsurprisingly, he was asymmetrical throughout, with spasm evident in the shoulders, above his withers



Working with Mr D was sheer pleasure.

and in his neck. He also displayed pain in his off hindquarters. Yet despite his obviously painful areas, he appreciated the bodywork. The openness of his character – warm and trusting – was clear as he accepted every move. We worked slowly and afterwards he stood untied for some 10 minutes, head low and eyes closed, absorbing the effects.

A few days later, I received an excited email from Becky. The pair had had another riding lesson, with surprising results. "We have been trying unsuccessfully to get right lead canter for a year", she wrote. "Last night we got it not once, but three times! My instructor couldn't believe it." Mr D had been so thrilled with his own success, it seems, that he kept performing this and other previously difficult moves time after time, entirely of his own volition. In fact, once he had started, Becky had trouble stopping him, such was his enthusiasm! She reported that his delight in being able to complete actions that had been previously impossible was palpable.

The horse felt good about himself, that much was clear.

This upward turn continued with later sessions. As Becky later wrote: "The bodywork has completely changed Mr Darcy's attitude and has also strengthened the bond between us. He has changed from being very resistant and not listening to paying attention and putting 110% into his schooling. He still enjoys a gallop but the bolting has stopped. He has gained a positive outlook, as previously he was certainly rather depressed. I always felt that he wanted to work hard for me but couldn't, in case his leg hurt. Now he really has the confidence to give it a go."

For me, Mr Darcy's happiness was enormously rewarding and I counted him amongst my favourite regular clients. Giving him Equine Touch was a pleasure, for he soon learned how to guide me to the places that were sore. I could sense him waiting for me to reach the spot and when I had done so, relieving whatever tension was causing him discomfort, he would sigh, relax, lick and chew, and drop that lovely black head.

Here was a horse who had suddenly discovered how it felt to be pain-free and to enjoy relatively unrestricted movement. He will never be symmetrical, but with regular Equine Touch sessions, he is doing as well as he possibly can. For such an intelligent horse, being involved in interesting activities is the essence of his life and this bodywork has prolonged that for him. I hear that he has been doing lots of lateral work – shoulder fore, Travers, leg yielding, a little bit of half pass – and now counter-canter. Small beer for many, perhaps, but a big deal for him and a wonderful achievement for this particular partnership.

After note: Perhaps missing their more reckless days together, the unassuming Becky has now taken up flying!

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Full details of Equine Touch courses can be found on the Australian Equine Touch website:



Becky and Mr D:
a great partnership

