

'The Mammoth'

Horse racing is a controversial sport and subject. You only have to Google 'horse racing' to know that there are fans and that there are non-fans (a mild term for avidly opposed to horse-racing). On Facebook fans generally invite fans and non-fans invite non-fans. In the event that these different viewpoints collide, heated debates and angry unframing is the order of the day.

I grew up fascinated by the sleek and shiny horses being jockeyed home on greener than green grass to cheering fans. It all seemed so glamorous and thrilling and fun. I was a child then, and to me horses were a magical all-consuming preoccupation. I loved them. I rode them. I talked about them and I drew them. The list goes on and in order to keep this article relevant, suffice to say that I lived them. Not much has changed since then.

I eventually explored my initial fascination with horse racing and quickly found out that my childhood vision of green grass and glorious glamour was mostly overshadowed by; early mornings, race-day disappointments and hard, sweaty, back-breaking work. Not that I minded - I was enchanted with the horses and loved riding them at track in the mornings. It literally was "a dream come true".

There is an old saying "when you know better, you do better". And so it is. With better I do not necessarily mean right but different and perhaps just that - better. I learned that a horse that refuses to load in to a starting stall is not necessarily doing so, in order to personally spoil your day. Working with fiery thoroughbred youngsters in a routine orientated and performance driven environment can be a challenge at the best of times. I swore, grumbled, pleaded and made my fair share of mistakes far more often than I would care to admit, yet I was also learning patience, humour and empathy. With this as the arsenal in my toolbox I was unfailingly made humble by true displays of utmost courage on the horses' part. Instead of rushing into a stall to muck out and merely shooing the occupant aside, I disciplined myself to adopt an attitude of respect and gratitude. To me this meant taking the time to thank the horse for sharing their space with me in that moment and the first time I did so I had tears in my eyes because that was all it took. Months of self-centered ignorance and haste forgiven in an instant.

And so I learned. I made space in my education to consider the horse's point of view. I attended Kelly Mark's natural horsemanship course in England, read up on nutrition, saddle fit and the horse's rate of development. I basically researched my way right out of the racing yard and later on out of the stud farm where I had become manager. I felt disillusioned. I somehow found myself turning my back on a tradition and a way of life that I knew well and had previously loved but that contained aspects that I felt I could no longer tolerate.

My knowledge and research had outgrown my experience and I felt myself to be in no-man's land.

It was a fan, non-fan sort of dilemma. And then I bought a yearling called 'Lady of Leisure' who was later on renamed 'The Mammoth'. It happened - as with so many other worthwhile events in our lives - without prior planning. The world of horse-racing was once again opened to me.

How to buy a racehorse without intending to do so in the first place.

At the time of the 2015 National Yearling Sale (NYS) in Germiston, I had never bid on a horse before – nor was I planning to - and I didn't, for that matter – I did however, walk away with a Philanthropist

filly out of Close to Paradise (IRE), from Middlefield Stud called Lady of Leisure. Or more aptly, a share. I went into partnership with my close friend and mentor Mariaan Nielson. In the past Mariaan had mostly experienced horses in a general appreciative sort of way, as well as vicariously, whenever I ranted and raved about everything and anything horsey (which was all the time). She accompanied me to my first day at the sale (for moral support) where I had my last draft consigned for the stud where I worked. I did not have clear plans as to what I was going to do with my life after the sale. I merely had a vague notion that I wanted to work with horses in a 'different way'.

Mariaan pleasingly fell in love with all of the horses. She marveled and made all the right noises, no matter which horse was pulled out of its box and presented to us. That day I was systematically working my way through the progeny of all the new sires at the sale. At the time this included the progenies of the sire Philanthropist. As LOT 103 was pulled out of her box I took note. I also marveled and made all the right noises. The dark grey filly presented was simply beautiful, despite the somewhat awkwardness of youth. She had what I consider to be 'good conformation'. We took some pictures, spoke with the breeder and left. We came back took additional pictures, spoke with the breeder some more and lingered. I repeated this exercise a few times in the next few days leading up to the auction!

Still, the very idea of owning a racehorse seemed out of whack. First of all I could not afford one and secondly, it just wasn't a dream of mine. I was looking at leaving the industry after all. So I didn't bid. I watched and wondered who would buy her – BUT NO ONE DID.

After that, things came together in an unexpected way. I remember phoning Mariaan at the time, and telling her that the filly was not sold. Also that the breeder had approached me rather "miffed" that I had never even tried to bid on the horse. In my sales naiveté at the time I had never even linked my initial fascination with the prospective hopes of the breeder!

Two days later I was back on the phone to Mariaan. The breeder had made me an offer. It wasn't that I had accepted it, nor was I actually contemplating it – yet I did feel a need for someone to ease any lingering dichotomous thoughts on the matter. I told Mariaan that of course I had declined - it was out of my price range after all and by the way; "what does she think of all of this?" Mariaan thought that we should buy the horse. And so we did. On Mariaan's birthday, together with 3 other partners.

I remember feeling elated at the prospect of being a first time horse owner. I somehow expected the grey filly to 'know' that we were from now on, inextricably bonded for life. I tried to exhort this sentiment by lovingly peering over her stable door. She responded by pulling back her ears and nipping my shoulder. Our journey had begun.

And that is how you buy a racehorse without planning to do so in the first place!

Growth:

The first thing that Mariaan and I agreed upon was that our filly – then named - Lady of Leisure would be given time to mature before starting a career as a race horse. I was and still am not in favour of 2 year olds being raced nor ridden. There is lots of preparation work to be done however without getting on to the horse's back. Lady of Leisure was patiently taught to accept saddle and bridle during a boarding stint at Jimmy Fell's farm in Hartebeespoortdam. During this time there were some disagreement amongst the owners as to exactly when the filly would be sent in for training. Mariaan and I brought forward our views with regards to waiting for more maturity; whereas the other partners were fervently in favour of a 2 year old career. The matter was eventually settled when Mariaan and

I bought the filly outright and relocated her to a stud farm called Riethuiskraal Stud in the Western-Cape.

Here she spent her time grazing and socializing with other horses. As the horses were mostly kept outside, Lady of Leisure's grey winter coat grew, and grew and grew some more! As a recently turned 3 YO she was changing shape dramatically and was developing into a graceful, strong and athletic looking horse. No more did she resemble the baby faced, scrawny necked, slightly awkward individual I had known as a yearling. I remember burying my face in her soft winter coat one chilly July morning during one of my visits and really noticing her emerging solidity and strength. She was calm and peaceful that particular morning - and tolerated my stifling hug with magnanimous acceptance. Her eyes were soft and her face serene and that is when the words came to me - Winter horse. Wisdom. Growth. Strength. Ancient Knowledge. 'The Mammoth'.

No foot no horse

It was whilst longlining 'The Mammoth', that I noticed a slight limp. Not too concerned at the time (there was no heat or swelling in the legs nor joints and the farrier had just been), I went back home. When I next visited her a month later she was noticeably limping. Upon inspection I was dismayed to find that her right hoof was cracked beyond the white line and that the left for was not faring much better.

What to do?

Many a horse owner can identify with the anxiety that goes with 'doing right by our horse' especially when faced with an issue to overcome whilst being bombarded with so many different opinions and options out there.

Our horse was lame, her hoof condition was deteriorating and I had to make a decision. By now I had stoically weathered several versions of the opinion that, 'she needs to run', she should be in training by now' and one specific and personal favorite: 'she is too old to put into training now – the best you can do is to sell her quick!' 'You should put shoes on' was added to the list. For the record, I do not disagree with shoeing horses during those instances when it is the best possible option, yet this time I was not convinced. I felt reluctant to put shoes on an already compromised structure and decided to approach the issue in a more holistic manner. I wanted to address the reason her hooves were collapsing. Little did I know that this decision would spiral Mariaan, 'The Mammoth' and me out of our current comfort orbit and on to a new path.

Barefoot

I think most horse owners have found that keeping a horse barefoot is not merely an easier, cheaper version of hoof care. It requires effort and input on the part of the owner as all other horse care aspects are intertwined with, and influence, the barefoot process. Terrain where the horse is kept, exercise regime, current health status, way of living, nutrition and specifically owner compliance rate, all affect the success of the ultimate outcome. I did not yet know any of this.

Determined to try an alternative way of addressing 'The Mammoth's lameness I came upon the website and contact details of Christine Blackett (Barefoot Trimmer, Body Worker and Straightness Trainer). I phoned her in the hopes that she would from now on trim 'The Mammoth's feet. She

regretfully told me that Stilbaai (where the stud is situated) was out of bounds. Christine is based in Port-Elizabeth. Another concern was that barefoot trimming goes hand in hand with a specific diet and because 'The Mammoth' was living with a herd, it would not be possible for me to tweak her nutrition accordingly. Mariaan and I discussed this which led me to send Christine a rather lengthy email imploring her to board our filly with her herd. I am always amazed when people actually take time out of their busy schedules to comprehensively reply to an email – not necessarily an oddity, but personal past experience tend to lean more toward no response, or apathetic one-line replies. Christine answered comprehensively, she was helpful, interested and above all, willing to take in 'The Mammoth'. We decided that once the filly was back on her feet (so to speak) that Christine would commence with in-hand Straightness Training sessions in order to bring her on. And so a new era unfolded bringing with it learning and rapid hoof healing. It was also a time during which 'The Mammoth' made herself some life-long friends of the four legged as well as the two legged variety.

What to wear?

Slowly a path was unfolding. Not only was 'The Mammoth' going to start her career at a later age, she was going to do so barefoot.

Saddle fit is a largely unexplored and undiscussed topic within the race industry. This issue is further exacerbated by the way trainers mostly make do with whichever training saddles are currently available on the market, buys in bulk, and adopt a one size fits all approach. Unfortunately, by their very design, these saddles are unlikely to ever fit and do not adequately clear the horse's wither, spine and other important pressure points.

I wanted the best possible training saddle for 'The Mammoth' so I turned to my old friend Google for guidance. None came. I researched, and read and despaired. No easy solution nor guidance on obtaining the best possible training saddle for race horses in training came to the fore. Jochen Schleese did. As they say you don't necessarily get what you want but rather that which you need and I needed to be educated.

Purpose

To me Jochen Schleese has come to represent one of those rare people who personify what it means to live one's purpose. Some people will argue and say there is no such thing. Life is random and we do what we can with what we've been given. So we do - yet retrospectively, there are those moments in everybody's life that stand out. They are not necessarily marked by huge fanfare but are noticeable because we noticed - and as a result caused us to be drawn to learn more about or experience something. Call them beacons in our search for meaning if you will. To be made redundant or reduced to randomness only through choice.

Jochen's memorable moment is of him as a young boy watching gauchos in Argentina galloping past their car, chasing a rhea, whilst swinging a bolo. To him it was like magic the way horse and rider travelled together as one. From then on recapturing this same magic would become his impetus in life. He became a professional rider, qualified as a Master Saddler, and founded Schleese Saddlery Services. Only later on - through introspection and choice - would it become his purpose.

Ever elusive, I have come to view purpose as something that is within you not beyond you, felt not forced and experienced not owned. Its very essence is oftentimes paradoxically lost in the act of doggedly holding on to what one felt compelled to do in the first place. Resumes therefore, no matter

how impressive, are rarely an indication of a purpose fulfilled; for purpose is subtle and lived out in truth. As a wiser person than me once wrote 'Connecting to purpose requires you to slow down, listen and practice a kinder way of being'. Jochen's professional resume starts with him graduating from Passier in 1985 as the youngest Certified Master Saddler in Germany. Ever. As a riding member of the German young rider's 3-Day Event team Jochen qualified for the European Championships in 1984. Shortly thereafter he had to retire his horse Pirat due to shoulder lameness, effectively ending his riding career. In 1986 Jochen became the Official Saddler for the World Dressage Championships. It was after having made over a thousand saddles that he was confronted with a video of a horse galloping on a treadmill. Fibre optic cameras were exposing the pressure and damage caused by an ill-fitting saddle, specifically the way forward facing tree-points systematically chip away at and damage the cartilage of the horse's scapula. For the first time Jochen attributed poor saddle fit as the cause of Pirat's lameness years before. It was a painful realization: *'I think of what we did to ward off the lameness: blocking, blistering, re-shoeing and pharmaceuticals – it makes me cry. I know now it was my saddle not made for the horse's requirements – with every step his shoulders were hit by forward facing tree points; the narrow gullet impacted his spinal processes, back ligaments and nerves, and the gullet plate pinched his wither muscle as he moved. I followed the advice of experts, but the result was a 'textbook case' of torture for my horse'*.

Jochen became a pioneer in studying the effects of poor saddle fit. Also, the way saddle fit, equine development, anatomy and the horse in motion, interrelate. He revolutionized his saddle tree designs accordingly and established Saddlefit 4 Life® (2006) as an independent organization in order to impart his knowledge and analysis skills. In his own words: *'No horse should suffer for the ignorance of his rider, nor should a sound horse have to be farmed out or be put down from damage so severe that nothing more can be done. We need to help the horse by improving back health and comfort'*. A similar "aha" moment with regards to manufacturing gender appropriate saddles after being made aware of health and comfort issues faced by women riding in saddles made for men, has put Jochen Schleese in a unique position to truly recapture the magic of horse and rider moving together as one.

Of course I did not know much of this but I was being made aware of saddle fit concepts never before discussed during any of my previous (extensive) research. I Finally I hit the Saddle fit 4 Life website and...

They were coming to town! Specifically, Jochen Schleese was coming to town! All the way from Canada on the 28th of November 2016 which was then only 4 weeks away. How is that for a non-random coincidence? It was to be their first certified course presented in South-Africa. I had some money saved up and was waiting for yet another sign as to whether this was a seminar to attend or not. The money I had saved up happened to amount to the exact amount as the cost of the seminar. I enrolled myself straight away.

A Trainer for 'The Mammoth'

By the time I had finally qualified as an Equine Ergonomist through Saddlefit 4 Life, 'The Mammoth' was a strapping 4 YO and was excelling in her straightness training sessions with Christine.

The time had come to send our filly in for training. Mariaan and I tentatively decided on her being trained at Fairview. My saddle fit studies had enabled me to locate and import the best current training

saddle option available for 'The Mammoth' and all that was needed now was a trainer! It couldn't be any trainer, it had to be someone willing to give the barefoot process a try. This would mean compliance to a special diet and supplements and having Christine continue trimming 'The Mammoth's feet.

I came upon Sharon Kotzen who after working for the legendary Ormond Ferraris at Turffontein racecourse for more than a decade, had moved to PE and finally taken out her trainer's license the year before. I knew about her diligence and strong work ethic as I often saw her at work at Turffontein racecourse (where I used to work), efficiently supervising and directing the large strings of Mr Ferraris. I hoped that she would be amenable to our special requests. Mariaan and I set up a meeting with Sharon and at the same time had her show us the yard and horses. Everything was clean and orderly and her horses were in tip-top shape.

Slightly skeptical, Sharon agreed to consult with equine nutritionist Shelhi Horn in order to work out a suitable diet to best assist in keeping 'The Mammoth's feet in optimal shape. Her fears were not allayed when we finally dropped off a woolly 4 YO who had never before seen the inside of a racecourse! Nevertheless, and to her credit, she gave our special requests a try. She phoned me up a month later elated with 'The Mammoth's rapid progress.

The first race:

16 March 2018. It is pouring with rain and I am anxiously navigating my way to Fairview Racecourse via slippery roads.

Mariaan arrived in PE from JHB the night before and I am looking forward to seeing both her and 'The Mammoth'. My ever supportive boyfriend has resigned himself to yet another horse filled weekend and is hard at work gauging the day's forecasted weather patterns by consulting numerous weather sites. They all come back with the same waterlogged answer. The windscreen wipers wave their arms in a frantic and wild co-operative dance of confirmation. I am waiting for an SMS to come through cancelling the day's scheduled race meeting and with it the 'The Mammoth's first ever race. It is a 1200m sprint up the straight on the grass track. Sure enough an SMS comes through. It is not cancelled though and has merely been switched to the poly-track. I sigh inwardly. This means a 1200m sprint around the bend. Not ideal for a first time race experience, especially considering 'The Mammoth's draw of 16 out of 16 runners. This means that she'll have to race on the outside of the track effectively causing her to run several lengths further than her counterparts.

As if on cue, the rain stops the moment we park in front of the stables. I rush in to wish the filly well for the day ahead. I enter her stable and her calm, inquisitive presence fills the hollow pocket of anxiety that has somehow found its way to the pit of my stomach. I stroke her and hug her and breathe in her sweet horsey scent. I feel centered again.

We meet up with Sharon and her husband Greg where Mariaan is already waiting. It is good to catch up with everyone and we kill time chatting with everyone seated at the table. Finally the time for our race draws near and we all assemble in the parade ring.

I have my camera handy and cannot help but notice the way the grey backdrop, so emblematic after a close to autumn downpour, seems to illuminate all surrounding colours within. It makes our cerise pink silks with white stars seem especially dazzling as worn by 'The Mammoth's race day jockey, Keanen Steyn.

I step behind the camera and wait for the filly to make her appearance. When she does I take note. The same way I took note of the yearling being pulled from her box at the National Yearling sale two and a half years before. However, it is different this time. Troubled waters, calm clear streams and turbulent swirls have made its way under the bridge ever since then.

I look at Mariaan, looking at 'The Mammoth' from behind my camera. She is wearing a bright pink blouse in support of the filly and I feel humbled. She has always flown the filly's flag high and made sure to be right by her side whenever there was a big move to be made, or to witness a significant first time experience or occasion. She loves 'The Mammoth' fervently and unconditionally.

I look at the filly holding her head high at a slight angle and walking ever so slowly as is her way when confronted with a new experience. My heart swells with pride. I realize right there and then that if the question of ownership was ever to arise, that it would be a clear cut case. We do not own this strong, silent and wise creature, we effectively belong to her.

'The Mammoth' canters down to the starting post as if she has done so a hundred times before. She jumps beautifully out of the starting gates and I follow the bright pink colours with nervous excitement. The filly runs wide around the bend and seems to tire during the final sprint up towards the post. She runs past the post 12th from 16 runners. As a trio (Mariaan, my ever supportive boyfriend and I) surge toward 'The Mammoth' as if she had just managed to win the Triple Crown. She is hugged, patted and praised. The groom leading her looks somewhat shocked and then his mouth quivers and a slow smile manages its way past the mask like expression of moments before. He confers with the other grooms who are in close proximity in an attempt to make sense of this strange occurrence. There are smiles and jokes all around. They don't quite understand the elation considering where 'The Mammoth' placed. But we do. It is easy to celebrate success once spotted.

Only time will tell what 'The Mammoth's future will bring.

She is still in training with Sharon Kotzen and doing well. She enjoys her work and takes pride in occasionally showing her track partners how it is done. She is still barefoot.

Our challenge is to stay present and to keep learning from her, and about her, as best we can.