

An Amazing Journey: The Chocolate Dash

By **BARU SPILLER**

Special to the Review

Phillipsburg Rodeo fans will remember Deb Christy and her phenomenal bay gelding, The Chocolate Dash a/k/a "Choc" -- three years ago they made an awesome run during Kansas' Biggest Rodeo, finishing as reserve champion just behind World Champion Mary Burger, turning in a blazing time of 16.9.

The duo finished out that season by winning two regional year-end rodeo championships and finishing in the top fifteen in the Prairie Circuit.

Deb and Choc started out the year 2009 hitting the pro rodeo trail, when tragedy struck the first part of April. Deb had come home from rodeos in Texas for a few days of rest and within 24 hours, Choc was deathly ill with classic colic symptoms.

Dr. Aaron White, of the Norton Animal Clinic, was called out immediately for emergency treatment. The next morning Deb loaded Choc up and they headed to Equine Veterinary Associates in Grand Island, where Dr. Doug Brunk placed Choc on IV's and ran tests to determine the problem.

Gastroscooping (for ulcers), blood work, toxin screens, organ screens, vitals, revealed NOTHING. Negative. Zilch.

Everything clinical said Choc was a healthy horse. It was suspected some type of allergic reaction to a poison, but the actual poison was impossible to diagnose. This also made it very difficult to treat without



DEB AND CHOC -- Deb Forell Christy racing her champion barrel horse at the Greensburg Rodeo in May.

knowing what to treat. Choc simply had no appetite and was rapidly losing weight. Within days he had lost a lot of muscle mass. It was heartbreaking for Deb to see her beautiful fit horse deteriorate so fast.

Dr. Brunk referred Deb and Choc on to Colorado State University's famed veterinary teaching school where Dr. Lutz Goehring also put Choc on IV's and ran a battery of tests. He suggested that Deb leave him for a week. Up to this point Deb had not left Choc, either sleeping in the barn with him or staying in her trailer nearby. Deb hesitantly came back home to take care of things that she had let slide during this ordeal.

Within two days, Deb got a call from Dr. Goehring stating that Choc had gone into a depression with her gone and she needed to get back out there. So she

rushed back to Greeley, where she did indeed find Choc very depressed and refusing to eat. By this time he was very thin.

All blood tests were coming back fine. It was very baffling to all. Another gastroscope was performed, this time they were able to get the scope past the stomach (where normal ulcers are found) and into the beginning of the small intestine, where inflammation was discovered.

Exploratory surgery was done and the inflammation was all along the small intestine. This explained the loss of appetite (due to the pain) and loss of weight as the inflammation was preventing proper utilization of nutrients Choc needed to survive.

Biopsies were clean so at least they had ruled out cancer, however the initial cause of the problem was to remain unknown. CSU's official diagnoses

of the inflammation was a rare condition called mild lymphoplasmacytic and eosinophilic enteritis, resulting from a severe allergic reaction to an unknown substance. Regardless, it set off a chain of events that ravaged his system.

In the meantime, Dr. Brunk had sent Deb an e-mail: "Deb, there is no doubt in my mind that he will get better but I can't tell you when. Stay positive. It will come." She had no idea that statement would become the proverbial knot at the end of the rope several times in the months to come.

Because Choc had already spent a great deal of time on IV's and would need to continue IV treatment, it was becoming extremely expensive. His recovery was also going to be very time intensive, 24/7 care for some time.

Many owners elect or have no choice but to euthanize when confronted with a similar situation. To complicate matters, Choc was insured with a sizeable mortality policy. She knew many people would have put their horse down for business reasons.

Fortunately for both Deb and Choc, the insurance policy also contained a major medical rider, which paid for some of the care. Deb also had full support of her husband, Steve, who stated "We are going to fix this horse, no matter what it takes!"

Another plus for Choc's team was the fact that Deb was self-employed and was able to

devote the 24 hours a day it would take to care for Choc, which was a key element as many horses during a period of illness such as Choc's simply give up.

CSU had done all they could; the rest was up to Choc's fighting spirit, Deb's devotion, and God's grace. The prognosis was "fair" with less than 50% chance of recovery.

Choc was started on shots of dexamethasone in a last resort to get the inflammation under control. If it worked, Choc would have a chance. If not, and he was not able to tolerate ample feedings to maintain his weight, Deb would have to make a quality of life decision – one which she simply could not bear to consider at that point.

As they prepared to head home, Deb was warned of the reality that Choc simply might not make it. The trip home was agonizing with Choc's life hanging in the balance, as she was torn between a feeling of helplessness and an agonizing decision. But she knew if he was not going to make it, she wanted him home for his final resting place.

The trip just about finished Choc. Once home, he lay in his stall just writhing in pain. Deb had always maintained a very positive attitude around her horse, but that night as she lay there cradling his head and crying, she and her husband talked about the decision to call Dr. White the next morning to have him put down.

But Choc had other plans... As if realizing his "team" was about to give up hope, Choc rallied, as if to say "Don't give up on me!" By morning, he was standing in his stall, ready for breakfast! Answered prayers!



DEB CHRISTY & CHOCOLATE DASH

Deb slept in the barn to monitor his every movement and maintain his around-the-clock feeding schedule. He could only tolerate a handful or two of feed every couple of hours. She took him for brief walks to graze fresh grass during the day, but the grazing had to be limited so his system didn't get overloaded. He had a huge mountain to climb, one baby step at a time.

At this point, Deb's goal was simply his survival. When she had to be absent from the barn for even a short time, she

never knew if she would find him alive or not.

She researched at length on the internet for anything that resembled Choc's illness and found very little. When veterinary opinion differed, she ultimately went with what seemed to work for Choc; and leaned heavily on her faith. Eventually his feedings were stretched to every 3 hours and then to 4 or 5 times a day.

It had been five months. The veterinarians gave a go ahead and she let Choc out by himself in the pasture. The next day after feeding

he was waiting at the gate to be let out. Deb had kept a daily journal since April. This day she wrote, "The top of the mountain has been reached! Praise, praise, praise the Lord!!! Angels are singing."

Choc would still have some period of discomfort, from adjusting to slow changes in schedule, the weather, healing, anxiety, or who knows what.

Dr. Goehring kept in close touch with Deb and was ever positive "...we know Choc is in good hands," he stated in one of his e-mails.

Deb took it one day at a time. Towards the end of September when she saw Choc tearing around the pasture, rearing, and playing with the colts, she wrote in her log "We may crash and burn tomorrow, but today we won the lottery!"

The remainder of the fall and winter had its ups and downs with intermittent colic episodes with Deb very seldom leaving home. Choc seemed to rely on her presence when he didn't feel good. If she was not around when he had one of his colic attacks, he could work himself into a frenzy; it was as if she was his lifeline.

By the spring of 2010, Deb had been riding Choc off and on and for the most part, he was doing well. He had gained most

of his weight and seemed happy. Deb thought about getting him ready for competition, knowing he would try his utmost in the arena. But she felt in her heart, he wasn't quite ready and elected to give him the rest of the summer off. She was constantly researching for products or feeds that would work for him. It was very difficult to find a supplement -- either they didn't work or Choc considered them "poison until proven otherwise." Mainly he preferred plain oats, no salt please.

During this time, Deb was hauling younger horses on the rodeo trail off and on, and towards the end of summer, Choc would stand at the gate, watching longingly when the trailer would leave. It had been suggested early

on by one of the veterinarians that getting Choc back into competition would possibly re-set his system as it was obvious he was a horse that loved what he was doing.

Towards the end of September, Deb hauled him to a local barrel race and on the spur of the moment, entered him. She intended to go in and make a nice slow run, but once through the gate, Choc took off and made one of his classic "Choc" runs, winning the race with the fastest time of the entire series. Whether it was returning to the arena or the change in treatment, something was working. A major corner was turned.

Originally, just hoping to have her beloved horse standing in the pasture, it now appeared that he was

actually going to be back into competition!

And return he has -- as of mid-July, Deb & Choc are leading the barrel racing standings in the Kansas Pro Rodeo Ass'n; the Nebraska State Rodeo Ass'n; and the Mid States Rodeo Ass'n; and is ranked in the top 20 of the WPRA Prairie Circuit standings.

Choc will always remain very sensitive to certain conditions and it is a balancing act to manage his system, but by listening to Choc and letting him tell her what he needs, together they have discovered what works.

For videos of some of his recent rodeo runs, you can go to www.triangle-cross.com.

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